JESSE GORDON

THE KNACK

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CREAM-COLORED COFFEE CUP

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To my fellow penmen and penwomen,
for all the comments and critiques.

Chapter 1

Bryce Powell hated long car rides. Like a criminal being sent away to prison against his will, he was buckled down tight, trapped behind a pane of glass as the outside world whipped by—the elusive canvas of some somber dream. He squinted through the backseat window of his mother's Toyota, closing his eyes almost completely so that the only thing he could see was the blur of twilight, a shapeless, nameless reality behind his eyelids that temporarily took him away from his own anger and frustration. No more stuffy car pressing in on him from all sides. No more lumpy duffel bag sinking in between his sweaty legs. No more stale Fritos on which he'd been subsisting for the past three days. Just the sound of the voice in his head bitching about how life sucked:

Tuesday. That's when your life ended. Wait—not Tuesday. That's just when you lost Nikki. Wednesday. The day after. That's when everything truly ended, Dad sitting there at the dinner table and telling you we're moving halfway across the country to Anaheim, to some lousy, over-priced burb in California. Yeah, they've got Disneyland, but honestly, tell me you could find Anaheim on a map as easily as you could Los Angeles or San Francisco.

Bryce had already been heartbroken over Nikki's decision to dump him for some random footballer with a car and a credit card. His skateboard tucked under his arm, he'd moped all the way home from school, kicking at anything that crossed his path and ignoring all the traffic signals, and nearly getting himself killed twice, actually. It hadn't seemed to matter, though. He'd pretty much made up his mind that he wanted to curl up in some dark hole and die—except that the day had only been half over, and his dad still had yet to make The Announcement.

The news had come at dinnertime that evening. The school year was a mere two months from ending and Bryce's father had somehow thought it would be appropriate to announce that the family would be making "big changes." Bryce had simply stopped eating and stared, moon-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Don't be upset," Daniel had said. "The company has been planning a move for a while. I know now isn't the best time, I know it's your senior year and all, but if I don't transfer, it means becoming surplussed—and we certainly don't need that. Not with our finances the way they are."

The company. Bryce cringed, picturing his father's face in his mind, hearing his voice. Daniel always spoke of his pencil-pusher job as if he were an on-the-button business executive, a valuable asset—when really he was just a payroll entry being swept out of the way.

All the way to Anaheim.

"Bry, you haven't budged in almost an hour. Is everything all right?"

Bryce stirred slightly, hearing his mother's voice and realizing the side of his face had become numb from being pressed against the window for so long. "Yeah," he lied, yawning.

Julia passed him a momentary glance through the rear-view mirror, and he knew she was immensely glad she'd insisted he ride with her instead of with Daniel in the moving van. She was right, of course: he hated his father right now, and had he been allowed to ride with the man in the same vehicle for more than five minutes, one of them would have finished the trip with a black eye.

"You know, you missed a lot of great scenery," Julia said a bit later as they pulled into a motel. "Your father wanted to fly us out to California, but I told him, 'No, let's drive instead so that Bryce can see some sights away from the city.'"

"Doesn't matter," Bryce said. "I have a headache. Where are we?"

"Blythe. Looks like your father's calling it a day."

Bryce snorted, shifting in his seat. "Pahrump."

"You've never been to Pahrump, sweetheart."

Julia pulled into a parking space beside the moving van and killed the engine, which shuddered and wheezed and finally came to a sputtering halt. Bryce got out of the car and stretched, checked the time on his cell phone.

Daniel exited the van (his Spurs cap plastered permanently to his sweaty scalp), bitched about a cramp. He handed Bryce some wadded cash. "Get us some drinks," he said, pointing to a Seven Eleven across the way, "and whatever you want for yourself." He patted Bryce on the shoulder and started toward the motel.

Bryce might have protested, or at least thrown a mild tantrum, but he figured a long day on the road had made the entire Powell family miserable enough as it was. He took the money and went into the convenience store.

Besides two kids slurping sodas and working an arcade machine, the place was barren. A balding, middle-aged, annoyed-looking clerk gave Bryce the usual glower —the non-verbal equivalent of, "Don't pocket anything or I'll sic the police on you." Because, of course, all convenience store clerks were jerks, and all seventeen-year-old boys were up to no good when they went straight to the back of the store where beer and soda mingled. Sure enough, after a moment of standing in front of the cooler and trying to decide between iced tea and fruit cocktail, Bryce heard footsteps approaching from behind. However, instead of the cashier, it was the two children he'd spotted at the arcade machine.

"Hi," greeted one, the boy. "My name's David."

"And mine's Melissa," the girl chimed, right on cue.

They looked to be related, a year or two apart from each other. Brother and sister, probably.

"Hi," Bryce said, frowning.

"What's your name?"

"Bryce."

"Nice to meet you, *Brawce*," Melissa said with an amused smile. "Are you new here?"

"Mm-hm. Headed toward Anaheim." He nodded at the front of the store, where the moving van could be seen through the window.

David giggled, trying to do a convincing southern accent. "*Yaw sownd lack uh Texun.*"

"Yeah," replied Bryce, trying his best to be patient. "I'm from San Antonio."

"Well howdy, cowboy," said Melissa, smiling once more—before suddenly looking around as if she were being watched. She took hold of Bryce's arm, pulling him down so that she could whisper in his ear. "They're going to eat you up, you know that?"

David joined in, grabbing Bryce's other arm and whispering, "We used to live in SoCal. They're bigger than you, and they're stronger than you. Maybe, if you're too much of a dud, they'll leave you alone—but they notice fresh blood real quick. Don't think they can't smell you coming."

"Very funny," Bryce laughed, pulling away.

Abruptly, the twins let him go and resumed their cheerful, elf-like stance as the clerk came up to them, a suspicious look in his eye.

"What did I tell you two about hanging around back here?" he said. "Off with you now."

The children wandered back to the arcade machine.

"You too," the clerk continued, facing Bryce. "Unless you're buying something."

Bryce held up the drinks.

"Fine, then." The clerk started up the aisle. "Register's over *here*."

(As if Bryce's eyes were merely stuck in his head for show.)

"I've had trouble with those two," the clerk said as he rang up the sodas. "They come in here all the time and hang out by the video games." His gaze caught and held Bryce's as he took his cash. "When they see people they don't know, they mess around with them, tell them God-knows-what about God-knows-who. Practical jokes, kiddie nonsense." Gaze unbroken, he handed Bryce his change. "Well, anyway, goodbye and good evening."

"Same to you," Bryce mumbled, abruptly confused. It was like suddenly awakening from a dream, hearing the last echoing sounds of his own snoring before coming fully awake. He blinked and found himself outside. He was walking across the parking lot, back toward the motel—

—*wait, what?* he thought to himself, and he stopped, a nauseating wave of vertigo overwhelming him, causing him to reel and drop to his knees. For a moment he thought he might faint, but the feeling quickly passed.

Picking up the drinks, he got to his feet and resumed his course.

It didn't occur to him that something out of the ordinary might have happened until later in the evening, when he was undressing for bed and going through his jeans pockets. He turned up a dollar in change, no receipt. Had he not been so utterly exhausted, he might have wondered why three sodas had cost so much; as it stood, he merely curled up in his sleeping bag and fell instantly asleep.

Chapter 2

A gentle whisper in his ear, a soft breeze across his face, and suddenly, with an inadvertent shudder, Joshua was awake.

Six twenty-five, he thought, glancing at the clock. Five minutes before the alarm was supposed to go off. *Right on time.*

He blinked his eyes a few more times and, keeping himself perfectly still, started focusing on the various details of his bedroom: down past his feet, a cluttered maple wood dresser and cracked mirror, partially obscured by tacky orange-colored curtains flowing lazily in the early morning breeze; a little to the right, an ancient RCA television set, balanced precariously atop a pile of encyclopedia volumes; T-shirts, socks, and underwear to the left—all draped over various components of his weight bench (he had a walk-in closet, but he'd long ago left it to the spiders and dust-mites).

He was looking for someone, he realized. Force of habit. *There's no one here but you, dipstick,* he thought, relaxing somewhat. He moved to get out of bed—and flinched when he saw his mottled reflection in the mirror. For a moment he thought he was looking at someone else, some horribly-distorted monster come alive from his nightmares, but it was only his reflection.

My own jacked-up reflection.

Straightening somewhat, he squinted so that his vision became blurred, so that the craggy skin of his face and chest appeared smooth. No more bumps, no more crevices, no more Freddy Krueger in ridiculous-looking Domo-kun boxers. Just... Josh.

"Just Josh," he whispered out loud, clenching his fists and concentrating hard on the mirror image. He began to knead the reflection, to warp his perception of his features. Slowly, he felt his skin begin to crawl, and he let out a stifled gasp as pain gripped his body from head to toe.

"Just...Josh..."

His arms and legs convulsed slightly, and he gasped again, resisting the urge to start scratching frantically all over himself as imaginary eels slithered between his joints, through his muscle fibers. For a moment it looked as if his head had become misshapen, as if his eyes were slowly dripping off his face like candle wax.

"Damn," he murmured, slamming his fists against his thighs. He'd been overextending himself, pumping out excessive amounts of energy without realizing he'd already achieved his goal. He let himself cool, blinked, looked at his reflection, and was able to see his slim, smooth visage without having to filter out the melted-cheese contour of his skin.

You're no movie star, but you'll do, he told himself, and used his forearm to dab the sweat from his brow. Then he found a towel and headed for the bathroom.

So began Joshua Swaney's morning.

Chapter 3

The Powells marked their arrival in Anaheim with lunch at Denny's. Bryce ate his omelet and gazed out the window at the palm trees outlining the parking lot, at a couple of skaters conversing loudly and trying to grind the curb beside the welcome sign.

Not much different from Texas, he thought.

Except for Ashley Zurich, the girl he met on the way to the men's room.

It would have been hard not to notice her. She was his age, five-foot-four, pale skin, and stunning silvery eyes—all hidden beneath baggy overalls, candy cane shirt, and contrasting black makeup. Her blond hair was done up in dreads, with violet-highlights, and her eyebrows and nostrils were pierced. She stood in the narrow hallway, leaning on the men's side and tapping her foot on the floor.

Bryce tried not to stare, but couldn't help it.

She gave him a quick look-over, then pointed to a sign hanging on the men's room door. "Men's room is out of order."

"Oh," Bryce murmured. "Figures. I don't suppose there's a good bush nearby?"

Ashley smiled amusedly, cocking her head slightly to one side. "Depends," she replied.

Bryce blushed. "I didn't mean...I mean..."

"I know." Ashley shoved her hand into his. "My name's Ashley—or just Ash, for short."

"I'm Bryce," he responded, noticing that her fingernails were painted black. He shook her hand; her skin was ice cold.

"I like your accent. Where are you from?"

"San Antonio. My dad got some kind of transfer from his job. We rolled in last night."

Ashley nodded. "So, you're a cowboy, huh?"

"No," laughed Bryce. "Do I look like one?"

"Is that your natural hair color?"

Unconsciously, Bryce ran a hand along the top of his head. "Yeah. I've been growing it out since I was a kid."

"Your parents let you do that?"

"Yeah. I used to have it buzzed, but I got tired of the Marine look. I don't think my mom and dad like it, but in the end it's my head, not theirs."

"Well, it's very nice. Very cute."

Bryce found himself developing another blush. "Uh, thanks."

Ashley seemed to be on the verge of posing another question when her cell

phone went off. She smiled prettily and reached into an obscured jacket pocket. "My boyfriend. He's picking me up."

"Oh, cool."

Bryce moved to the side so that she could pass. As she did, though, something struck him as odd. He paused for a moment, following the back of Ashley's head as she moved up the hallway.

"I'll be seeing you around, then," she said over her shoulder. She turned a corner and was gone.

"Bye," Bryce said, and turned in place slightly. *Weird,* he thought, his gaze settling on a framed picture, sealed in glass, hanging on the wall beside the men's room door. It took him a moment to get rid of the prickly feeling at the base of his neck, and it was all the more infuriating since the picture, depicting nothing more extraordinary than a springtime meadow, seemed perfectly average in all respects. Nevertheless, it bothered him to no end. *Something* had been wrong, as he'd moved to let Ashley pass—

—and then it hit him: she'd had no reflection.

Standing where he was now, Bryce could clearly see the outline of his head and shoulders, some murky facial details as well, reflected in the glass of the picture frame. Ashley...she hadn't shown up at all.

He headed back to his parents' table.

God, all this time on the road is messing with my head, he thought.

* * *

Mark Wozniak, a friend of a friend of Daniel's, was a slightly obese beach-bum of a man who apparently owned multiple chunks of real-estate in and around Orange County. His overly buoyant demeanor complimented his gaudy Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts combination perfectly; he sang the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme as the Powells pulled into the driveway of a two-story, beige and white townhouse.

"Welcome to Belinda Circle!" he greeted jovially, before Daniel even had a chance to kill the engine. "The place to be if you don't have to be anywhere else."

Bryce vacated the back seat of the Toyota and stood in the driveway. *No front lawn,* he thought, following with his eyes the tacky stone-pebble path that led from the driveway to the front door.

"Holy geez," Mark exclaimed, having just shaken hands with Daniel and now facing Bryce. "Have you been feeding the kid Miracle-Gro?" He laughed then, held his hand out over the concrete. "Last time I saw you, you were this tall—just a small fry."

Bryce smiled knowingly, though he couldn't for the life of him recall when he'd ever seen Mark. He surely would have faltered had Mark pursued a conversation. Thankfully, Julia stepped in to give Mark a hug, thereby drawing the man's attention elsewhere.

While his parents made small talk, Bryce sized up his new home. The cul-de-sac was clean, the half-dozen homes well-kept, though it was all more desert-like than

he'd expected. There was an abundance of sparkling white concrete, one driveway sloping into another, that did away with the need for lawn work altogether. In fact, the only plant life was embodied by a row of palms planted curbside.

As for the Powells' new rental itself, Bryce couldn't help but think that the Wicked Witch of the West had missed Dorothy's home altogether and instead dropped a two-story beach flat in the middle of Anaheim. It was like a double-decker mobile home, without the wheels.

After a good ten to fifteen minutes of Daniel continuously thanking Mark for arranging their room and board, praising Mark for his generosity—kissing Mark's butt, basically—Bryce finally asked for the key, citing his need to urinate as an excuse to start the unpacking.

"Take care of the place, kid," Mark said with a wink. He patted himself on the chest. "Your landlord's a nice guy, but he's a little impatient when it comes to those wild parties."

Daniel laughed in true yes-man fashion while Bryce thanked Mark and politely took the key. On the inside, he was cringing. *My dad's in a bind,* he thought, *and Mark knows it. Friends or not, Mark's going to lord it over us that he let us stay here for half the rent. Nice way to start things off.*

Bryce let himself inside, did a quick run-through before finding the single upstairs bathroom. Overall, the place was Spartan, the polished floorboards bare, the plastic window blinds as plain as could be. There were a lot of windows on the ground floor, which was nice—except the view would have been much better with a beach nearby.

It took an hour to unload the moving van (Mark departed early on, but promised to stop by every so often to see how things were going). Daniel and Bryce tag-teamed the bigger pieces of furniture, arranging everything in a very basic manner in the living room. Beds, dressers, and boxes followed.

Bryce's new room was above the garage, overlooking the driveway. It was half the size of the master—which his parents commandeered, no questions asked—and had a fraction of the closet space. Still somewhat grumpy from the trip, as well as the noonday sun, Bryce piled all his things inside and promptly stripped off his sweat-soaked T-shirt. He kicked off his shoes and socks as well. There was no central air-conditioning.

With a sigh, he went to the window and pushed it open as far as it would go. Then he set himself to unpacking for several minutes before finally yielding to the heat and heading downstairs for a drink. He gulped down water from the kitchen faucet and went outside to examine the backyard. The pavement was warm under his feet as he stepped between various ant trails to reach the shed, which was unlocked. There was a garden hose inside, some rusty tools, no hidden cache of stolen jewelry or tell-all diaries left behind by the previous tenants—in other words, nothing really interesting.

"Hey! What are you doing back there?"

Bryce jumped slightly, the shed door slamming shut with a loud bang. On the other side of the chain-link fence that separated the Powells' yard from the

neighbor's was a short, middle-aged man with sun-browned skin and long white hair tucked into a straw hat. He clutched a garden hoe in one hand, which he leaned on, ever so slightly, as he glared at Bryce.

"Well?" he demanded. "Are you just going to stand there like a tongueless, barefooted hippie, or are you going to explain yourself?"

Bryce's response was somewhat fragmented; he was having trouble matching up the man's voice with his diminutive body. "I, uh, I live here."

The man raised his snowy eyebrows, then lowered them again, transforming his beady eyes into impossibly thin slits. "I don't recognize you. What's your name?"

Great, Bryce thought to himself. *Been here five minutes and already the next-door neighbor's got it out for me.* "My name's Bryce, sir. My family and I just moved here."

"Really, now?"

"Yeah. We've been unloading all afternoon."

Softening his gaze somewhat, the man looked toward the street. "So, you bought the house."

"Well, my parents, actually."

"I noticed Wozniak took the 'For Sale' sign down a few days back." He looked back at Bryce and extended his arm over the fence. "The name's Nathan Brown."

After a moment's consideration, Bryce stepped up to the fence and shook Nathan's hand. "Nice to meet you," he said.

"Likewise. You look parched. Want a soda?"

Bryce bit his lip, looked back over his shoulder in a combination of mistrust concerning his hoe-wielding neighbor and loyalty to his moving duties. "I really should be getting back to—"

"Nonsense! This heat's unbearable. You want ice?"

"Um...okay."

"Come around front. I'll let you in."

* * *

Cradling a plastic tumbler filled with Coca Cola, Bryce sat with Nathan in the Amazon rain forest that was the man's backyard. Unlike the Powells' yard, the concrete slabs here had been removed to expose the underlying soil, which gave forth a plethora of ferns and wildflowers. An aqua-blue tarp had been draped across strategically-placed wooden stakes, and served as a canopy for Nathan's makeshift greenhouse. Funnily enough, Bryce found he quite liked it, preferring the ever-present sheen of sweat on his skin to the blistering dry heat that was outside. The humidity reminded him of home.

"So," said Nathan, sipping a beer. "A country boy, eh? Texas?"

"San Antonio," replied Bryce, nodding.

"Fabulous. Let me say it's nice to be able to talk to a normal lad these days."

Bryce shrugged. "If you think I'm the standard."

"Well, you've got manners, and you've got the look of someone who doesn't

have their head in the clouds—or in the catacombs, as is often the case." Another sip of beer. "People around here have got the most wretched attitude problems I've ever seen. Kids wearing leather and chains, eyeliner and tattoos and all that unholy paraphernalia. You've got twelve-year-olds looking like dogs on leashes being led by girls looking like hookers in training bras." Leaning closer to Bryce's ear, Nathan continued in a low whisper. "You see that house over there, across the way?"

Bryce shifted on his stool and spotted a section of tarp that hung loose along the street side portion of the yard, and which provided a fairly good view of the cul-de-sac. "The one with the wide patio?"

"Mm-hmm," Nathan continued, staring at the house as if it were an unearthly spectacle. "Last week, that high-schooler they got brought home a group of these girlies who looked to be demons of the night, and a whole lot older than he is. They were all dressed in black and wearing their chains down to their knees—now, you tell me: What do you suppose they do up in his bedroom until his parents get home, hmm? And under the cover of the loudest godforsaken music I ever heard, if you can call what they play *music*."

Bryce developed a slight blush as he briefly recalled his own recent experiences with *that stuff*: frantic moments with half-known girls' hands down his pants, trying to get the job done before his parents came home. And this year, with Nikki, he'd progressed further than his parents would ever be comfortable with, had been dallying with the prospect of going all the way—until the breakup, of course.

"I don't hear any music now," he said, clearing his throat.

"There's no music because today's Thursday, a weekday. The boy's always out bright and early on weekdays, but not to school, mind you. And he never comes back till evening, when he can climb into his bedroom window without being seen. My guess is that he likes to wash off the smell of booze and cigarettes before his parents realize what he's been up to. It's a pretty sad thing, really, because I used to know the lad when he was respectable, not more than six months ago—but that was before he met *them*." Silence fell over the greenhouse for a moment as Nathan seemed to think about something indescribably distant.

"Who's 'them?'" Bryce finally asked.

Nathan looked as if he'd just tasted something bitter. "You know the type, right? The ones who've got the knack of persuasion?"

Bryce shook his head.

"My, you're *not* from around here, are you? You really have no idea?"

Again, Bryce shook his head and shrugged. No, he wasn't from around here, and he was beginning to think such a quality was something best kept to himself. "What are we talking about? Some kind of street gang?"

"It's those *freaks*. You know, the ones who aren't quite like all the rest. The ones who are into that vampire crap with all the blackness and pale skin. Unholy and like ravenous bloodhounds. They'll take an innocent youth and turn them into a creature of the night. That's what they did to that boy across the street. Changed him. Made him one of *them*."

Again, an emphasis on that word: *them*. As if certain residents of Anaheim

weren't entirely human.

Caught halfway between amusement and alarm, Bryce started to ask for a more detailed explanation, but at that moment, Nathan's phone rang, and he excused himself to go answer it. This left Bryce alone to ponder the meaning of the man's oratory, and to wonder if perhaps he wasn't operating with a full deck. He sipped his soda, listened to the muffled sounds of Nathan conversing inside the house, and allowed his eyes to wander about the garden. Almost immediately he caught sight of something odd resting at the far end of the yard. Obscured by several layers of glistening leaves and vines, it looked like someone had set a life-sized statue against the rear fence.

Curious, Bryce rose from his seat and made his way through the leafage until he found himself standing before the statue, which very closely resembled Nathan Brown. Moistened soil, rich with fleshy roots, comprised much of the limbs and torso. Most fascinating, though, was the face, which was so lifelike it might have been simply a layer of dirt and grime painted onto a sleeping person's real face. Bryce stepped in close to examine the craftsmanship—and started as suddenly, and without warning, the eyelids flashed open.

He stifled a yelp, dropped his drink and took several steps backward. As he did so, the eyes focused on him, followed his movements.

"Oh, crap," he gasped.

He turned and ran.

Chapter 4

Savanna High School: Joshua tried not to look at anyone or anything as he crossed the front lawn, fell into step behind a group of giggling senior girls dressed in shorts and tank-tops. One of them glanced back at him and smiled; he blinked at her uncertainly, as if he wasn't sure whether she was being friendly or finding some sort of amusement in his appearance.

You're so damned anti-social, he told himself. *Like you* want *to be a failure.*

The girl faced forward again, rejoined her friends in conversation. Suddenly Joshua found himself staring at her butt.

Go on. Look at it, you perv, see how it wiggles just right when she walks. Makes you want to whip out the goods right here and—

He bit down viciously on his tongue.

Screw you, he thought—as if he were talking to another person entirely. His left leg twitched involuntarily, and he stumbled, but he didn't fall—he refused to fall and embarrass himself in front of everyone.

Another of the girls, having heard his commotion, glanced back at him; this time he smiled assuredly.

"Good morning, ladies," he said.

In response, the girls giggled collectively. One of them offered a muffled, "What a dork," as they navigated away from him.

He sighed and continued on into the main building, where the lockers were. The hallway was bustling with students fetching their books for first period, making small talk before class, jotting down last-minute quiz notes. Joshua ignored them all. He went straight to his locker and started entering the combination.

56...no, 42...no, 1,263...you can't even remember your own locker combination? Pathetic.

He banged his fist against the locker and closed his eyes for a moment as he tried to filter out all the excess noise in his brain, tried to concentrate on keeping himself calm and collected. He heard a familiar laugh as someone brushed his shoulder.

Her.

She wasn't laughing at him—he knew that. Nevertheless, he waited a moment before opening his eyes and looking down the hallway to where she was standing with her friends, not really doing anything. Just standing around coolly and waiting for the bell to ring.

Bitch, he thought, and she turned, right on cue, to give him a "drop dead" look. He was ready for it, though, and turned away, focused his mind elsewhere—denied

her influence. Normally he could hold his own, but for some reason today his resolve was just a bit shaky. He mumbled something incoherent and then slammed his head into his locker, making a noise loud enough for half the school to hear.

"Dude," said a nearby student, a boy. "You okay?"

Joshua didn't answer. He merely scowled and rubbed his head as he quickly opened his locker, stuffed what he needed into his backpack, and then exited the main building. He stared at the ground the entire time, crossing the quad and entering portable P-5, which was empty, save for the quiet, geeky girl who always sat by herself in the back. His own desk was at the opposite end of the portable, next to one of the windows. He took his seat and let himself slouch, head against the chair back, legs splayed, hands resting on the desktop.

Without much enthusiasm, he waited for class to begin.

* * *

Bryce wasn't in the best of moods when his alarm clock went off. The previous day having been spent unloading boxes and arranging furniture, he was more than slightly tempted to sleep in. His parents, however, were adamant that school take precedence.

With a loud yawn, he slipped from his half-assembled bed and went to the window, opening the blinds and peering out into the honeyed morning light. He spotted Nathan, at the head of his front yard, stuffing a handful of envelopes into his mailbox.

Weird old fart, he thought, recalling yesterday's experience in the greenhouse with a nervous shudder. *Guy must get off on playing pranks like that. No wonder he lives alone.* He watched as Nathan closed the mailbox, lifted the flag, took one suspicious look about the cul-de-sac, and then retreated into his home.

Bryce showered, dressed himself in jeans and a T-shirt, and, backpack slung over his shoulder, skateboard tucked under his arm, met Daniel downstairs. They had a quick breakfast, then it was off to school and work.

Savanna High School consisted of a squat, single-story main building and several portable classrooms scattered around the sprawling gymnasium. A mixture of gently swaying palms and cypress provided ambiance.

Daniel, having phoned the attendance office beforehand, pulled up in front and handed Bryce all the necessary paperwork. Father and son then parted ways without waving goodbye to one another. Whether or not he was upset with Daniel, he knew it was their way of getting along. His parents had never really babied or pampered him in any traditional sense. They fed and clothed him, yes, and provided a roof over his head, but beyond that he was his own man. Even as a child, he'd quickly gotten used to fighting his own playground battles. To anyone else, the situation was an inferiority complex waiting to happen; to Bryce, it was just the way things were.

He received a few passing glances from other students, most of whom were still in the process of waking up as they shuffled, almost zombie-like, across the lawn,

up the walkway. A couple of girls waiting near the main entrance smiled at him and waved; one of them blew him a kiss and called him "honey."

He entered the main hallway and was greeted by a cool, air-conditioned breeze. There were rows of lockers on either side, classrooms dispersed throughout. Bryce hefted his backpack, his skateboard, tried not to look too outlandish as he searched for the attendance office. His sneakers making slight squeaking noises on the linoleum floor.

"May I help you?"

Bryce turned and found himself in the presence of a plump, middle-aged woman dressed in a flowery frock that looked very much like a giant shower curtain. There were only a handful of other students currently accessing their lockers, but every one of them now looked in his direction, some smirking, some merely curious as to what the Plum Lady had to say this morning.

God, I hate being the new guy, Bryce thought.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I'm transferring in from Lee High School, San Antonio." He held up the manila folder that Daniel had given him.

Plum Lady took it, flipped through briefly. She removed a pair of pink sheafs and handed the rest back. Pointing down the hall, she said, "I'll clock you in. The counseling office is out in the center of the quad."

"Thanks," Bryce replied, and followed her directions. He noted, as he exited the building, that she supervised his path from her post in the middle of the hallway—as if he might start defacing lockers at any moment. It made him wonder if her vigilance was due to his being a newbie, or if all the students at Savanna were genuine misfits.

Outside, he discovered that the quad also acted as the school's makeshift cafeteria. There were a dozen or so wooden picnic tables set out across an uneven patch of concrete that was surrounded by portables. More palm trees were planted throughout, though the amount of shade they actually provided was questionable.

Bryce found the counseling office and entered, presenting himself to the secretary, a fetchingly-cute girl wearing an oversized letterman jacket.

"What's your name?" she asked with a brilliant smile.

"Bryce Powell."

"I'm Sheryl."

She held out her hand. When he shook it, he couldn't help but notice how soft and warm she was, and how the feeling seemed to spread throughout him like, well...hot cocoa on a cold winter night. He also couldn't help noticing that her gaze flicked—ever so subtly—down the length of his torso.

She was checking him out.

"Nice to meet you," he said, feeling the slightest bit uncomfortable. There was a sort of heat building just beneath his skin.

Sheryl continued smiling, held his hand a moment longer before standing. "Go ahead and have a seat, Bryce. I'll tell Ms. Ryan you're here."

Bryce complied, now checking *her* out as she crossed the portable and entered one of two adjacent cubicles. When she was out of sight, the heat dissipated, and he

blinked several times, wondering what had just happened. A moment later, Sheryl returned—and so did the heat. He had to forcibly focus his mind when she told him he could go and see the counselor (who was, thankfully, well into her fifties, and not nearly as comely).

He sat slightly slumped through the scheduling process, his thoughts divided haphazardly between a mish-mash of credit requirements and Sheryl's remembered afterimage. It wasn't *just* that she'd been insanely hot. There had been something else there, too. A pulling, a persuasion—a *gravity*, for lack of a better term. A tractor beam powered by emotion, charisma, confidence, and, yes, sex. It was embarrassing and infuriating, and Bryce had no idea why, at one point, he started sweating. Thankfully, Ms. Ryan didn't seem to notice. When she was through filling out his schedule, she handed it to him and wished him good luck.

He thanked her and left the cubicle.

Sheryl was still at her desk near the entrance. She was filing her nails, but when she saw Bryce coming near, she stopped in mid-stroke and smiled prettily at him—and the heat intensified tenfold.

"Everything go okay?" she asked, tilting her head and letting her hair fall to one side.

Bryce felt his heart hammering in his chest. "Sure. Couldn't be better. I guess I'll see you around, then."

"Okay." Sheryl waved with her fingers. "Bye, Bryce Powell."

It was almost painful to leave the office, though once he stood outside in the open air, his head instantly cleared, and his pulse settled.

Dork, dork, dork! he thought, realizing he must have come off as a drooling idiot in front of the first actual *valley girl* he'd ever met. On any given day, he was calm and collected when it came to girls, even the drop-dead gorgeous ones. Sheryl was the first to have affected him so intensely with the mere touch of a hand.

California girls. He grinned and looked at his schedule, which listed his first class as History, portable P-5, Mr. Brandt. He was only fifteen minutes late when he entered the classroom. The teacher, a tall, gangly gray-haired man in a flannel shirt and jeans, had been standing at the head of the class, dictating out of a textbook. When he spotted Bryce, he turned on his heel, facing him, and flashed a toothy grin.

"Speak of the Nords!" he bellowed in classic *Back to the Future* Doc Brown fashion. Low laughter rippled throughout the class. "Well, come on in!" He gestured for Bryce to join him beside a narrow, shabby podium, where the roll book was kept. As he entered Bryce's name, he said, "Now, why don't you tell the class here a little bit about yourself?"

Bryce felt a slight blush developing, and decided right then and there that Mr. Brandt was an evil gnome wrapped in a mad scientist's body (what *was* the teacher fascination with making the new guy do a monologue in front of a room full of strangers?).

"Um," he said, after a moment's thought, "my name's Bryce, I'm from Texas, and I hate cowboy boots."

The class laughed, which eased the pressure somewhat, despite the odds of his pronounced southern accent being considered a fake.

"Ooh!" Brandt cried, grabbing him by the shoulder. "Listen to that! A new student *and* a tourist! I think Bryce here needs some special treatment! Should we make him rattle off the American Presidents in chronological order?"

God, no, thought Bryce. Thankfully, there was a mixed reaction from the class, thereby prompting Brandt to forgo an academic hazing. He signed Bryce's schedule and told him to find an empty seat wherever he liked. As there were only two available—one up front directly facing the teacher's desk, and the other in the back of the row closest to the window—he chose the one in the back.

Brandt jumped right back into his oratory—something about Nordic history, accordingly—and gradually the class shifted its attention from the New Kid back to the lesson. After the day's assignment was given, Brandt handed a history book to the student at the front of the row to pass back to Bryce, who was jotting down notes when the person in front of him tapped his shoulder.

"Hey."

Bryce looked up—and started, for he hadn't been paying much attention as he'd made his way to his desk, and as such hadn't noticed the boy in front of him, a boy whose facial features had been blurred by thick, criss-crossing channels of scarred flesh. His scalp was bare; he had no eyebrows.

A burn victim.

"Thanks," Bryce said, noticing (as he took the textbook) the same mottled flesh on the back of the boy's hands.

"I'm Josh," the boy whispered. "Don't mind Brandt. He loves giving the new guys a hard time. He treats the new girls like prospective brides—but it's all for laughs."

Bryce forced Josh's appearance to the back of his mind and grinned. "I'll bet he knows every President's name by heart, too."

"He kills at parties. You did well, by the way."

"I just said what I thought a Texas boy was supposed to say, I guess."

"When did you get here?"

"Yesterday. Didn't get to see much because I was helping to move all of my family's stuff into the new house. Tired as hell."

Josh nodded sympathetically and conversed with him for a short while longer before Brandt reminded them that they were in class to *learn*, and not to play twenty questions. Bryce snickered and buried himself in his work, and found it immensely more relaxing to have broken the ice with someone so soon—even if that someone was, well, quite extraordinarily afflicted. It was admirable, though, that Josh, despite his condition, could be so open with others, so sure of himself.

At five minutes before nine, class was dismissed, and everyone eagerly began filing out of the portable.

Josh lingered as Bryce put his books into his backpack. "Hey, do you know anybody around here yet?"

Bryce shrugged. "The attendance lady."

"She doesn't count."

Bryce laughed.

"If you want, I can meet you at lunch and show you around a little bit. Do you play basketball?"

"Sure," said Bryce.

"Cool. I'll find you in the quad."

Chapter 5

Dawn was a thin sliver of light shining through the crack at the bottom of the clubhouse door. Kyna Miller shifted ever so slightly between the sheets, listened intently to the burgeoning sounds of the backyard as she surveyed the scene in her mind: birds chirping, crows calling from perches in cedar and palm; a possum foraging through the half-dried undergrowth; neighborhood tomcats scurrying between rusted garbage cans and pockmarked Hefty bags. Farther along, past the vine-covered chain-link fence, noises came from the street. Someone was coughing and spitting phlegm—a hungover carouser stumbling home from an overnight bender, no doubt.

No noises came from the house.

He must have taken off during the middle of the night.

Kyna nudged the blanket aside, slid from bed, and stretched in the darkness. She moved to her dresser, where she lit several peppermint-scented pillar candles, illuminating the clubhouse interior, giving it dimension. There weren't many amenities. A weight machine towered in one corner, overshadowing her bed and dresser. A full-length mirror hung past the foot of the bed; the whole adjacent wall had been devoted to a large bookshelf crammed with volumes. The floor was bare concrete, the unpolished cedar walls equally unadorned. Overall, it wasn't the stereotypical teenage girl's living space, but then again, there was no need for such excess here. A room was just a room—a place where one took shelter during the night. A home, as most people called it, was merely an artistic extension of oneself, a vain attempt at coping with some other personal shortcoming.

Kyna wasn't trying to cope. She had a room, and that was all she needed.

She began her usual morning ritual with a twenty-minute warm-up comprised of light aerobics, and then moved on to the weight machine, working shoulders, arms, chest, and back before lying on the floor and doing a set of abdominal crunches. Lastly, a combination of squats and leg-lifts, the finale to a total body workout that left her sweaty and slightly out of breath. Her muscles didn't complain much, though; she'd been starting her mornings as such for years. Regular discipline had helped temper her body.

Determination had done the rest.

She gathered up a change of clothes for the day and exited her room via the triple-locked clubhouse door. The backyard of her mother's house was pale, sickly-looking, and unkempt, as usual. Kyna crossed the yard, entered the house through the unlocked kitchen screen door. Inside, the sound of flies buzzing here and there between stacks of food-encrusted dishes and discarded takeout bags permeated a

stifling silence. She paused only briefly to get a drink of water, as well as survey the incurable clutter. Evidently the mere fact that the mess was growing into its own realm was not reason enough for Mrs. Miller to consider a cleanup operation.

Onward, into the hallway, toward the bathroom. Kyna stopped halfway along to peer into her mother's bedroom. Mrs. Miller was there, sprawled on her front on the bed, the blanket arranged haphazardly around her. She had a bottle of Jack Daniels clutched in one lanky hand—a consummate lover for a woman who'd lost all interest in real men.

Not so much God's artistry anymore, Kyna thought, with a trace of bitterness. She watched and listened to the rhythm of her mother's gentle breathing, reminded herself how much weight the woman had lost these last few years. Once, she'd been lithe and beautiful, a delicate flower in full bloom. Once, she'd lived a life in pursuit of love and happiness: herself, her daughter, and her husband.

"Appreciate the beauty of God's most wonderful creations," she'd always said, back when they'd still had the Coachman, back when they'd lived a blissfully naïve fantasy life on the road, at various campgrounds. Alas, it had been many years since that early, innocent rough draft had been discarded, replaced with dull, decaying *now*.

Move on. Kyna closed the bedroom door, forced herself to the end of the hall and into the bathroom. She locked herself inside. *Get clean, do it quickly, don't linger.* She had a system, and had trained herself to soap, shampoo, and rinse in just under three minutes. That was largely the reason why she excluded most of the "cutesy" grooming behaviors of other girls her age, why she kept her boy-cut: low maintenance meant less time spent naked and vulnerable in a bathroom with only one lock, in a house as unprotected against him as it was against a nuclear holocaust.

When she was through, she quickly dressed herself while taking a disinterested look at her reflection in the mirror. She saw short blond locks, wet and plastered to her forehead and sides of her face, dark eyelashes, green eyes, pale skin, thin lips. Her frame was wiry and angular; she could have been born a boy and her appearance wouldn't have strayed much from what it was now. That was fine with her.

She returned to the backyard, locked herself inside the clubhouse, where she finished her grooming tasks. Again, there wasn't much to do since she never wore makeup. She spent only a few moments in front of the mirror plucking, combing, deodorizing before fetching her backpack and leaving her humble home for the day.

And so, this girl who lifted weights at six in the morning, this teenage anomaly with the short hair and semi-androgynous features, walked purposefully along the streets of the ghetto as she headed for school. No one bothered her, for she knew that from even a close distance she had the appearance of a dauntless, able-bodied youth. Her masculine stride lacked the wiggle of the hips that many girls had, which might have proved somewhat regretful for anyone else—but not for Kyna, who reminded herself that this wasn't a part of town for pretty little girls to be

bouncing around. Looking tough—*being* tough—was good. Freak out all the deadbeats because they thought you were a dyke or a dud.

That was how you did it.

She stopped at a crosswalk at the edge of the block. Here, the neighborhood houses and apartment complexes gave way to a strip mall. There were rows of towering palms and patches of wilted shrubs sectioning off the parking lots (and acting as makeshift garbage dumps for empty cigarette cartons and used condoms). A pair of Hispanic men, in their early twenties, shared a smoke under the shelter of a nearby bus terminal. When they saw Kyna, they scowled and gave her dirty looks.

"*Madrina*," one of them called.

The other: "Where you titties, girl?"

Kyna glared at him, wondering if this was some distorted method of courtship. "What do you care?"

The man snickered. "I want you tell me why you have such pretty girl face, but you wear boy's clothes and have boy's haircut?"

If looks could kill, Kyna's would have pulverized her mockers right then and there. It was, however, obvious that these two weren't worth the time or the effort. She turned away as the light changed, crossed the street and took satisfaction in the knowledge that some men would never know more than the palms of their hands when it came to romance.

Like Joshua.

Silly, messed-up Joshua. She could see him now in her mind's eye: standing in front of his bedroom mirror, trying to mold himself into what he wanted as he got ready for school. As adamant as Kyna was concerning the whole self-image thing—only he'd never reached the level of discipline that she had. Standing there in his underwear, clenching his fists, gasping and panting as if having a coronary, he was merely reminding himself of his own shortcomings with every attempt to forget.

Such an absolute dud, she thought, disdainfully—though she took care not to let herself become too worked up. She hated him, sure, but she also felt sorry for him. It was a duality of emotion that oftentimes led her to tears if she wasn't careful—so she kept herself occupied with a mental image of him during the remainder of her walk.

She tried to be amused by what she saw.

In a combination of bad timing and terrible luck, she entered the main Savanna building shortly after he did, and when she saw him in the hall, standing in front of his locker like a Neanderthal trying to decipher computer code, she was unable to resist making a more personal impression. It was instinct, really. She slithered deftly between the other students, laughing as she brushed Joshua's shoulder, her mere presence sending a massive psychological ripple through him.

Good, she thought, noting that she could have tapped his crotch with a cattle prod and not gotten a more sufficient reaction. *Let him squirm—let him stew in his own juices. I don't have to go out of my way to avoid him just because of what... happened.*

Natalie and Anthony waited for her beside their adjoining lockers at the end of

the hall. Both were dark-skinned—the former African, the latter Hispanic—and dressed in baggy jeans and flannel.

Natalie tucked a stick of chewing gum into her mouth. "Hi, Kee," she said, and clasped hands with Kyna.

Anthony merely nodded accordingly and smiled. "You see ol' Dumbo's face just now? He looks like a little kid lost in a shopping mall."

Kyna nodded and, knowing that Joshua was looking in her direction, turned her back to him. "Pathetic that he even bothers to show up here anymore."

Bitch.

She felt the heat at the back of her neck, felt him staring at her, working at her—actually *working* at her, as if, by some colossal fluke, she'd chosen today to let down her defenses. She glanced over her shoulder, sent him an ice-cold look that seemed to make him pale several shades despite his perfectly realistic tan.

Get lost, beach bum.

Make me.

She faced him full now, took hold of his will, kneaded it like so much dough. Despite what appeared to be a serious attempt at resistance, he ended up turning red in the face and slamming his head into his locker. The sound reverberated throughout the entire hallway.

Pathetic.

She laughed and let him go, watched as nearby students paid him curious glances. There was a certain form of guilty satisfaction involved in seeing him like this, seeing his inadequacy, his mottled skin and bald head—blatant trophies of his own blunders. Of course, to everyone else he was just Josh, with the perfectly even tan and lean beach boy look so many girls found irresistible. He had, at the very least, mastered his own batch of illusions, which allowed him to blend in with everyone else visually (minus all the questions and grimaces from others his grotesque, *true* appearance would have aroused).

Hide all you want, Kyna thought, *behind the cute-boy disguise, but I still know who you really are.*

Joshua might have been listening to her thoughts, but if he was, he made no show of it. He merely gathered his things from his locker and walked off toward the exit at the opposite end of the hallway.

Kyna sighed inwardly, relegated herself to her own locker, removing what she needed for her first two classes, inadvertently scolding herself for ever having thought of Joshua Swaney as *cute*. Cute, harmless, beach-boy-next-door—

—only far from innocent.

* * *

The first half of the day went rather smoothly for Bryce. Most of the students he met were friendly enough and didn't pry too much into the reasons behind his accent and all the other nuances that marked him as a newcomer.

At noon, when lunchtime arrived, he went first to the attendance office to get

himself a locker. Plum Lady was ready for him with a grimace and a pre-recorded sigh of restrained exasperation.

"No drugs are allowed on the premises," she said, fishing a legal pad from her desk. "That goes for alcohol, too. Prescription medication must first be cleared with the nurse. No weapons are allowed, no switchblades, guns, screwdrivers, battle axes—the board gives surprise inspections throughout the year, so don't waste your time coming up with new and interesting ways to holster a pocketknife to the elastic of your underwear. *That*—" She gestured at his skateboard. "—will have to remain in your locker during school hours."

It was difficult to discern whether she was attempting (unsuccessfully) to be funny or whether she'd actually encountered ax-wielding teenage delinquents (who kept knives stashed in their underwear) during her time at Savanna High. Bryce simply nodded and tried to look as amiable as possible.

"You'll need to sign here," she continued, sliding the legal pad toward him. "Keep in mind that you are fully responsible for any damage to the locker. Don't store any kind of food inside, and please don't leave your gym clothes inside either. There are separate lockers in the gym for that."

Bryce signed his name, endured another minute or two of the woman's compelling chatter, and muttered "thank you" when he was finally handed his locker combination on a piece of paper.

Naturally, it didn't work the first time around, and he soon found himself the last student lingering in the main hallway, trying to figure out the jam in his locker while everyone else was out in the quad, eating.

"Stuck, huh?" came a girl's voice.

He looked up and saw Ashley, backpack slung over one shoulder, mesmerizing silver eyes and violet highlights as prolific as ever. He hadn't heard her approach.

"Hey, Ash," he said, smiling. "I didn't know you went to Savanna."

"Duh," chuckled Ashley. "How would you know? You're new here."

"Well, yeah." Bryce frowned and looked at his locker. "Um...I guess I have to go ask for another combination. This thing isn't working."

"Don't bother. The administration around here is as helpful as an ingrown toenail." She stepped around Bryce, reaching for the locker handle. "Here, let me try. What's the combination?"

He read it out loud to her, and she twiddled the knob. Without the slightest resistance, the lock clicked and the door opened.

"Nice," said Bryce. "How'd you do it?"

Ashley shrugged. "You have to have the knack."

"Oh, I see." He crammed his books and skateboard inside.

"So, how has your first day been going? Meeting people? Taking names?"

"I think I've collected more textbooks than friends."

"Well, here's one more to add to your list." Ashley slid her hand, chilled as ice, into his—an unexpectedly bold move, for sure—and motioned for him to follow her toward the exit. "Come on. Let's get lunch together."

She led him outside, where it was hot and crowded. They bought sandwiches

from one of the numerous food carts dispersed throughout the quad and, at Ashley's request, ended up heading out to the football field, where they shared a seat at the top of the bleachers, under the noonday sun.

"I like to come up here when I eat," said Ashley, planting her feet on the seat in front of her and resting her back against the wind guard. "I can see everything."

"Yeah, it's nice," replied Bryce, wiping his brow. Underneath his T-shirt he could feel tiny beads of perspiration trickling down his chest. However, Ashley, who was wearing long sleeves and pants, seemed not to have broken a sweat at all.

They ate in silence for the first few minutes, appreciating a bird's eye view of the field and, farther on, the various portable classrooms arranged around the main building. When Ashley failed to initiate any sort of conversation, Bryce turned to face her and found that she was watching him intently, a slight smile curling the corners of her lips.

"So," he said, clearing his throat.

Ashley leaned forward suddenly, kissed him on the mouth. Despite the fact that she was ice cold, her skin seemed to infuse an odd sort of heat with his own.

He pulled back, caught off guard by her unsolicited advance. He reached up with his hand and felt her chilled saliva on his lips. "Hey, whoa—hold on a minute," he began.

"Wanna share?" Ashley whispered, moving closer and clasping his hands in earnest.

Bryce twitched slightly, bewildered. He looked at her, considered the definition of "share" in the present context. Girls had asked him questions like that before, though they had always been girls he'd known. Friends. Ashley, on the other hand, was hardly even an acquaintance—and already she wanted to *share*.

And she was ice cold.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, noting that every time he let go of her she grabbed him again.

"You've never done it before?"

"We don't know each other."

"So? You can learn a lot about someone from the way they share."

Bryce laughed incredulously. "Are you for real?"

In answer, Ashley leaned in for another kiss, this time more aggressive, nibbling hard, very nearly biting him before he broke it off, jumped up, and sidled several steps away.

"*Stop*," he insisted.

Ashley tilted her head slightly to one side, pouting as she got to her feet. "You don't want to be friends?"

"It's not that. I mean, I appreciate your wanting to have lunch with me and all, but I'm not into the casual sex thing, or whatever it is you, uh, Goths like to do."

"I'm not a Goth."

"Oh, well, I didn't mean—"

Ashley suddenly became enraged. She let loose a ragged screech and lunged for him, grabbing a hold of his arm with both hands and sinking her teeth into his

flesh.

"Ow!" he cried, and stumbled backward, grabbing her by the hair and shoving her away. "Are you crazy or something?"

"Get away from me!" Ashley shouted, licking his blood from her lips. She stomped with her foot, clenched her fists. "Go away! Now!"

Confused as ever (and quite in pain), Bryce clutched his injured arm and clambered down the bleachers. He half expected Ashley to sprout fangs and come leaping down onto him like some Hollywood vampire, but she remained where she was as he crossed the football field.

Damn, he thought, realizing he'd left his food behind.

He also realized that he'd completely forgotten about meeting up with Joshua until he spotted him jogging across the quad. The poor guy's skin looked ten times worse in bright sunlight than it did indoors.

"Hey, where've you been?" Joshua asked, falling into step.

Bryce groaned, looking down at his arm. Blood was dribbling from two nasty-looking holes just above his wrist. "Some girl, um, bit me."

Joshua wrinkled his nose. "Dude, that's messed up. You should have the nurse take a look."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Come on. I'll take you to her." Joshua started toward the main building.

Bryce followed. "Sorry about lunch. This girl, she was helping me with my locker before things turned bad. I just totally forgot."

"No worries."

"Cool. I didn't want you to think I was avoiding you because of your, well, you know. I guess I mean—"

Joshua stopped, halfway up the steps, a strange expression on his face. "What?"

Bryce bit his lip, acutely aware that he'd stuck his foot in his mouth. "Oh, geez—I didn't mean...never mind." He started up the steps.

"Okay," Joshua said, and resumed his ascent. When he reached the entrance, he held the door open. "Tell you what. The bell's going to ring soon, and I just remembered I have to go and get some notes from a friend before next class. The nurse's office is down past Attendance, on the right. Maybe we can meet up after school?"

"Sounds good."

"Cool. I'll catch you on the front lawn, by the flag pole."

"Thanks."

Bryce walked down the hallway, his face flushed, his heart hammering in his chest. He hadn't meant to bring up Joshua's physical appearance, nor had he intended to miss their lunch date. Such things happened from time to time, but Joshua, with his condition...it wasn't altogether unlikely that some of his peers made excuses when they weren't up to hanging around a burn victim. *And now he probably thinks I'm doing the same thing: avoiding him.*

As if allowing himself to be groped by an ice-cube-Goth-girl who enjoyed biting people was something better to do.

Chapter 6

Uncertain as to his destination, Joshua wandered through the quad and mulled over what was quickly becoming a serious mental crisis.

This sucks, he thought, grinding his teeth. *This totally sucks.*

He didn't really look at anyone or anything as he moved past tables occupied by his contemporaries, teenagers enjoying the lunch hour with their friends, eating food, swapping jokes, sharing light-hearted laughter. Meanwhile, here he was, wandering about in utter solitude, hands stuffed in his pockets, head drooped forward so that he was constantly looking away from everyone's faces. Sometimes, on similar occasions, when he had no one to talk to (a daily conundrum, actually), he would pretend to be walking somewhere important, as if he were too busy to hang out during lunch—and every time he would end up in the library, sitting in the corner with a copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

Today he merely seethed, walking hastily toward nowhere, keeping a red-hot afterimage burning behind his eyelids, the memory of a scene he hadn't even witnessed—yet it was driving him insane, for once again he'd been cheated out of making a new friend.

Preempted by Ashley. Pale-faced bitch. Bryce probably got a blowjob out of it, though it's not his fault he's the new guy, not his fault he can't say "no" when he's being tapped by a pro. We've all had our time with Ash, haven't we?

Joshua felt a freak-out coming on. With minutes left before the end of the lunch period, he went into the gymnasium, descended the steps and made his way into the boys' locker room. There were a few other students here, nonchalantly standing around and having idle conversations about girls and sports. No one paid him any attention as he slipped into the restroom area, locked himself in one of the toilet stalls, alone, out of the way. He held his head in his hands, as if it might pop off and roll away unless he was ultra-careful.

Once again, Just Josh is too little, too late. Never mind that Bryce will never find a better friend in the whole neighborhood. But what was I supposed to expect? He's the new guy. He wants to make friends with the cool kids. So he drops me like a bad habit, goes after the first chick he can find—nothing wrong with that.

Except that it had been Ash.

Bitter tears, salty and hot, started trickling from Joshua's eyes as he realized that his jealousy was merely a cover for the denial that every time he tried to be normal, every time he tried to make friends, they were snatched away from him by the cool kids.

He should've been mine, I should have made *him mine, not given him the benefit*

of the doubt...not left him to chance and to Ash and Kyna and all their succubus friends. Should've paid more attention, should've played the game, Josh.

He cried softly for another minute or so before finding himself in a sort of contemplative calm, an underlying place where the tumultuous storm clouds of his own angst parted to reveal a clear blue sky above.

It's still only Bryce's first day. He's still new, still innocent; they haven't yet ravaged him like a pack of hungry wolves.

I can still make him mine.

The bell rang. Joshua stood, reached for the door handle to let himself out of the stall. He stifled a yelp when he noticed that the skin of his hand and forearm was mottled and craggy.

He'd inadvertently reverted to his natural form, just as he'd done earlier that morning in his bedroom.

Damn it. Every time I get the least bit upset...

Clenching his fists, he concentrated on himself, seeing his own body from a distance, molding the wretched contour of his wounds back into the smooth, young skin of Just Josh. As usual, the pain was overwhelming, and he had to bite down hard to keep himself from crying out loud, lest he attract the attention of the other boys in the locker room. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, trickled down the back of his neck, soaking his shirt. In a moment it was over. He checked himself, felt his face and the top of his head, and decided that he was "real" again. He wasn't finished, however.

Reordering his looks once in a day was taxing; twice left him considerably drained and with a hunger so pronounced he could almost hear his stomach growling. With significant effort, he wiped his brow, re-seated himself on the edge of the toilet seat. There was a switchblade in his pocket; he took it out, made the slightest incision in his left forearm. He lapped up what he could, barely enough to tide him over, then used a wad of toilet paper to clean up the rest as he willed his skin to knit itself.

Pathetic, he thought, leaving the stall, making his way back through the locker room, knowing that his face must be flushed and sweaty, obvious, so damned *obvious* to the other boys what he *must* have been doing with himself in the restroom.

Screw them all. They're not me. They don't know a thing about how it all works.

Fortunately, no one seemed to care.

He exited the gym, relinquished himself to sunlight. The tardy bell rang when he was halfway to his next class, but he didn't care. He was already focusing on what to do about the nagging ache now permeating his every fiber. It was tolerable now, thanks to the toilet stall fake-out, but sure to become unbearable misery by the end of the day if he didn't *properly* replenish himself.

Find someone. Anyone. Preferably someone you don't know—always easier that way, and the qi *will be way better.*

Failing that, there was always Ash.

* * *

She was crying when Kyna found her. Sitting alone at the top of the bleachers, she looked an absolute mess: her hair was mussed, her lipstick smeared, and there was blood dribbling down her chin.

"Oh, Ash. What's the matter?" Kyna asked, sitting beside her and fishing a handkerchief from her pocket. She cleaned up as much of the blood as she could, though some of it had already dried. It was amazing she'd been out here this long without attracting anyone's attention.

"I don't like this," Ashley responded, after a moment. She was shaking her head, scrunching up her face as if in pain.

Kyna scooted closer, put her arm around Ashley's shoulders. "Tell me. Tell me what happened."

Another moment, mumbling unintelligibly to herself, and then: "This guy named Bryce. I met him yesterday. He's new here, really hot. I thought I could work him, but he wouldn't let me. He got upset and pushed me away. So I had to bite him. I didn't want to, but...why'd he turn me down, Kee? What did I do wrong?"

"Throwing the knack's always hard," replied Kyna, smoothing Ashley's hair. "Sometimes it works, and sometimes you just can't seem to get a single person to even look at you."

"I hate this, Kee. I get so hungry sometimes. I don't know what to do anymore. I'm not a very good scout."

"Don't say that. It's not your fault. You did your best."

Ashley wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her makeup, making her face look worse than it already was. She looked down at the foot of the bleachers, where Natalie and Anthony, respectfully keeping their distance, had paired up to work on the previous night's homework.

"Want us to share?" Kyna asked, knowing that there probably wouldn't be any further opportunities that day for Ashley to satiate herself. "We can all meet up after school, at my place. We'll use Ken."

Ashley erupted into laughter. "Oh, yes! He's *so* easy!"

Kyna patted Ashley on the back and smiled—but not for long, for she caught sight of the school's security guard, accompanied by the principal, crossing the football field.

Headed in their direction.

"Crap," Kyna murmured.

Ashley grabbed her by the arm. "Oh, Kee! He told—Bryce told on me, I just know it! We're going to get in trouble!"

"No," said Kyna, "we're not."

Mario Castillo was slightly atypical, as far as principals went. A forty-something Puerto Rican whose disarming smile was always ready for any occasion, he approached the teenagers in apparent good cheer. There was, however, a veiled intensity to his gaze that made it clear he wasn't here to make smalltalk.

"How are we doing today?" he asked, nodding at Natalie and Anthony.

They, in turn, shrugged indifferently and looked over their shoulders at Kyna and Ashley.

Mario cleared his throat, focused his gaze on Ashley. "Ms. Zurich, I need to have a word with you."

At this, Ashley went rigid. Her grip on Kyna's arm tightened. "Kee..."

"Shh. Wait here."

Kyna descended the bleachers, taking the seats two at a time and alighting on the grass before the adults. Her eyes locked with Mario's. "Yes, Mr. Castillo?"

"Hello, Kyna," he replied, meeting her stare. "Is there some reason why Ash has decided not to join us?"

There was a gentle pulling, a slight extension of the aura. Kyna had always suspected Mario of having some notion of the knack—or, at the very least, of having such a charismatic personality as to be unable to ignore his own sway over other people.

As such, she reacted appropriately, extending her own influence, playing the game.

"She's not feeling well, sir."

"I really need to talk to her."

"Not right now."

"It's quite important."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Is she in trouble?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether or not she's done anything wrong."

"She hasn't."

Mario blinked, as if coming to a sudden realization. He exchanged glances with the security guard, whose expression was equally as dumbfounded. Meanwhile, in the background, Kyna continued working him over, pushing him toward a pre-ordained end result. Not so quickly that he might catch on to what was happening, but gently enough so that he felt confident he was in control of his own decisions.

He let the matter drop. "Okay, then. Just looking out for you guys, that's all."

"Thanks, Mr. Castillo."

Mario nodded and turned to leave. The security guard followed.

When they were both out of sight, Ashley hurried down to join her friends. "They didn't stand a chance," she said gleefully. "Good work, Kee."

Kyna wiped her brow. She was sweating from her exertions. "They're only duds. Easy as breathing."

"But," said Natalie, getting to her feet, "what about this Bryce dude? If he knows about Ashley, he might come back with questions. He might make trouble. He's not one of us."

True, thought Kyna. *Just because a person's been bitten doesn't necessarily mean*

he's ours yet. Different people reacted in different ways.

She took Ashley by the shoulders, leaned in close so that their foreheads touched. "Let me see."

Ashley acquiesced, closing her eyes and opening herself. Their auras intermingled briefly as they swapped collected impressions.

Geez, thought Kyna. *I didn't realize just how low your stores were.*

There were only a few vibrant impressions left: a lanky, desperate tenth-grade boy from last week; a grown man who should have known better, from a few days ago; various sessions of self-mutilation during which Ashley had miserably consumed her own blood so as to trick her brain into thinking she'd actually eaten.

And Bryce. Blond hair, blue eyes, tall and strapping. His essence sent a tingle up Kyna's spine. She was taken aback by his good looks, certainly, but also by her own reaction to him. She might have developed an instant crush had she not reminded herself that he was a guy, a male, a *man*. Probably a stereotypical asshole as well. After all, the cuter a boy was, the more ruthless his relationships were.

Don't beat around the bush.

She absorbed what Ashley had gathered from Bryce's essence, added it to her own personal store so that when she saw him, she would know who he was, know what he'd done to Ash.

Then she would even the score.

* * *

Bryce entered Ms. Featley's fifth period algebra classroom twenty minutes late and handed her his now-wrinkled schedule and nurse's pink-slip.

"Ooh," she said, noticing the bandage on Bryce's arm. "What's happened to you, Mister—" She glanced briefly at the schedule. "—Powell?"

Rather than go into an unnecessarily long story about an ice-cube vampire girl who went around offering strangers free bites, Bryce simply shrugged and said, "I had a little accident. The nurse fixed me up, though."

Ms. Featley shook her head and made a "tsk-tsk" noise as she handed back his paperwork.

The desks were arranged in two long rows on opposite sides of the classroom, leaving the center clear so that the teacher could roam freely during lectures. Bryce found a seat and did his best to go with the flow as far as the lesson was concerned —though it was a bit difficult because his attention refused to focus on anything but one of the girls sitting in the opposite row.

She wasn't his typical idea of cute. Her blond hair was short, and though her face was pretty, her figure was straight, utilitarian. She wasn't manly, but she was certainly harder-looking than most girls. He wondered briefly if she was gay, or perhaps an over-achieving tomboy.

He was simultaneously perplexed and entranced by her looks; he couldn't stop staring. A few times she caught his gaze, and he blushed, looked away, tried to concentrate on his work—only to find himself staring at her again and again. The

more he looked, the more he realized it was her face, most of all, that made the biggest impression. Soft, delicate, almost angelic, it was in stark contrast to the rest of her, and perhaps the only potent indication of her femininity. Amazingly, Bryce found himself surveying her lower half, trying to make out shape and contour beneath her gray sweats. He looked up again—

—and flinched as he caught her looking right at him, smiling at him, ever so slightly.

He looked away, surprised at himself, surprised by his sudden, sloppy boldness. *She wants me,* he heard himself thinking. It was an utmost certainty that this girl, about whom he knew absolutely nothing, was attracted to him. *Ah, but hold on there, buddy. Since when did you go for the tomboy types?* Another glance in her direction, followed by another fluttering of his heart. *Crazy. Nuts. Just look at her. She must be a dyke, a hardcore feminist or something. Hair's too short, hardly any curves.*

Still, he was mesmerized, the heat building beneath his skin and turning his thoughts to molasses. It was comparable to what he'd experienced earlier in the counseling office—only this was a magnification, a full-blown maelstrom.

The bell rang, and Bryce (having lost all track of time) was freed from his reverie as the Girl with the Boy's Haircut promptly rose from her desk and exited the classroom along with everyone else.

It seemed he'd breezed through half the class without even trying.

Fending off a dissatisfied look from Ms. Featley, he hastily gathered up his things and left.

* * *

The fever kicked in during P.E. class, which was, thankfully, the last period of the day. Without the proper gym shorts or T-shirt, Bryce ended up sitting out anyway. By the time the dismissal bell rang, he was ablaze, and aching from head to toe. His first instinct was to blame the bite wound, though oddly enough it felt perfectly fine when compared to the rest of him.

Needless to say, he disregarded Joshua's earlier invitation to meet after school and went straight home, relegating himself to the fact that he would probably be spending the weekend in bed.

* * *

Belinda Circle.

Kyna made a mental note to herself as she passed by, heading eastward along Lincoln and keeping a view of Bryce in her mind's eye.

That's how you do it. Stay with him, coax him through the transition, keep him moving nicely along until tonight. Should be ready by then. All that energy fighting the fever, just trying to stay afloat.

This weekend is going to be an absolute feast.

Chapter 7

By the time Bryce arrived home, his fever had quadrupled in intensity. Dragging his feet as he went, he fetched the mail and crossed the concrete driveway. He let himself inside, discarding his backpack and skateboard beside the front door as he made a beeline for the kitchen. There, he splashed his face with water from the tap and took several large mouthfuls in a vain attempt to cool himself. It didn't work, however, as the heat continued to build in waves.

He felt like he was burning alive.

"Mom?" he called out, leaning against the counter and closing his eyes. He could feel a deep throb throughout his body. *Probably a 24-hour flu,* he thought. Or...what did they call it? Montezuma's revenge? *Eating and drinking in a new place, with a different set of germs than you're used to. You get really sick for the first couple of days because your body needs to adjust its immune system.*

Julia was nowhere to be found (and Daniel would likely be at work until five o'clock), but she'd left a note on the table indicating her absence: RUNNING ERRANDS. BE BACK SOON.

Bryce sighed and left the kitchen. He went upstairs and planned out a little self-care in his head: Tylenol, shower, bed. In the bathroom he found a box marked "amenities" containing razor blades, shaving cream, hydrogen peroxide, mouthwash, cotton swabs, tubes of toothpaste—but no Tylenol.

Wonderful.

He shoved the box aside, leaned against the sink counter to examine his reflection in the mirror. His face was flushed bright red, and his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. He was sweating profusely. Large droplets trickled down his forehead and cheeks.

Goddamn, he thought, for the first time becoming a little frightened. *I'm dying or something.*

The bite wound. Could it be infected already? Fully expecting to see the ravages of some exotic form of bacterial malady puckering his skin, he unwrapped the bandages and examined his arm. However, despite some slight bruising, the wound appeared to be healing normally. No swelling, no redness, no pus—no loose flaps of skin seceding from his body and forming little miniature bodies of their own. In a sense, this was reassuring, but in another, it left unanswered the basic question rattling around in his mind: What's wrong with me?

He undressed and stepped into the bathtub. He turned on the cold water and let the spray cascade over his smoldering body for a few minutes before he realized it was doing nothing to alleviate the inner furnace threatening to turn him into a

human sparkler. His heart hammered in his chest, the blood rushed in his ears—he was starting to get light-headed.

Anxiety? he wondered. He'd never been one to worry, though he'd heard stories of other people stressing themselves out to the point where they became physically ill. *Maybe, with the move, all the adjustments of setting up camp in a new city, a new state...but no, that's not me. I don't flip out like this.*

Carelessly trailing water as he went, he left the shower, grabbed a towel from the linen cabinet and wrapped it around himself as he stumbled into the hallway. He paused for a moment to try and discern any sounds from down below.

No one home yet.

The dizziness was getting to him. He barely made it to his bedroom before he collapsed on the floor, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Without enough strength to even lift his arms, he remained where he was as he slowly lost consciousness.

His last coherent thought was whether or not he'd left the shower nozzle on.

* * *

He drifted in and out of sleep for several hours, watching the fading sunlight, projected through his bedroom window, travel across the ceiling. Eventually it was replaced with the sulfuric glow of the outdoor street lamps as evening fell, and still the fever raged on.

I wonder if anyone will find me before it's too late, he wondered, listening to the drumbeat of his heart, feeling skin crawl beneath skin, a second layer of himself writhing and shifting deep down inside. Eventually he found himself lying on his back on his bed, sweat rolling down his neck, glistening on his chest and abdomen.

He tilted his head somewhat to the right, saw the bath towel strewn across the floor—evidence that he'd dragged himself up onto the bed without considering his shame.

Great. Not only am I dying, I'm dying without any clothes on. Oh, please don't let Mom and Dad find me like this.

Ages and ages passed. No one checked in on him. Gradually, the fever dissipated, and his limbs felt more like arms and legs rather than gelatinous slabs of lifeless matter. Experimentally, he raised his arms, looked at his hands as he flexed his fingers. Mobile again, he sat up, an indiscriminate hunger buzzing in his blood.

A glance at the alarm clock, which read eleven-thirty, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed. For the most part, his body was obedient to his commands, though it felt as if he'd been working his barbell for the last eight hours. He was thirsty enough to drink his weight in water; feeling the sweat-soaked sheets, it became evident where it had all gone.

He was out of his bedroom, halfway down the darkened hallway when he realized that he was still undressed. Embarrassed at first, he paused only briefly to listen for the telltale noises of light snoring emanating from his parents' bedroom. After that, the new thrill of sneaking around the house in the nude took precedence. He descended into the living room, moved through the semi-darkness

without making a sound. In the kitchen, he fetched a glass and filled it with water from the tap. He emptied it in six gulps and placed it in the sink. Then he made his way back into the living room.

The Girl with the Boy's Haircut was waiting for him.

Caught off guard, Bryce immediately covered his groin with his hands.

The Girl merely laughed. She sat on an unopened box near the window; there was enough light from the street lamp outside to make it obvious she was just as unclad as he was.

Bryce was unable to speak. He took a tentative step forward, wondered how she'd gotten inside.

The Girl initiated the conversation:

"Nice birthday suit."

Bryce lowered his eyes in shame. When he looked back up he saw the Girl stepping boldly toward him, linking her arms around his shoulders, embracing him without hesitation.

"I saw you staring at me in class today," she said.

Seeing her like this, *holding* her like this, Bryce found himself aflame. It was the counseling office with Sheryl, Ms. Featley's algebra class all over again. He wanted to return her embrace, but instead he cleared his throat, took a step back. "What's going on? How did you—"

"The front door was unlocked," the Girl replied, frowning as she stepped in close and embraced him once again. "You've got to remember, you're in southern California now."

"But how did you know I live here?"

"You ask too many questions."

Bryce took another step backward and found himself suddenly pressed up against the wall.

"Nowhere to go," the Girl said.

Nowhere to go. "I'm dreaming—this is in my head, right?"

"Could be."

"But then...how...why am I dreaming of you?"

"So we can play together."

"I don't understand." Bryce looked away, toward the staircase. "I mean... someone's going to catch us. My parents are upstairs."

"I told you, it's a dream. But if it were real, wouldn't you be excited?"

A moment's thought, a moment's agonizing. He was unable to pull away. "I don't know," he said, squirming. "I don't know you."

"Doesn't matter. This is all in your head—you said so yourself."

"But we can't just...I mean...in my dreams I don't usually—"

She smiled wickedly. "You usually don't what?"

"I don't...I mean...you have to know a person before you just go and...and..."

"That's what your mommy and daddy tell you when they're trying to stuff you full of their *morals*. But as soon as you're on your own, it's your own rules. What matters to you when you're banging some girl?"

"I don't *bang* girls."

"Right."

"I don't."

"So, what, then? Holding hands? Kisses on the cheek? Tell me you don't blast those pecs to impress the girls."

Bryce swallowed, tried to resist giving an answer, tried to ignore the Girl's insistent kneading, but she was pulling at him with more than her hands now, and his memories spilled over, just a bit—memories of Nikki and himself, alone in her bedroom with the lights down low— "Why's it so important?"

"Because it is. 'You can learn a lot about someone from the way they share.' Or maybe all it takes is a girl letting her take you out to the bleachers and offering a swap, but you think you're too good for her, so you push her aside like a piece of trash."

An image came sharply into focus in Bryce's mind, some far-off memory of himself and a pale Goth girl sitting together atop the bleachers at Savanna. "How'd you know about that?"

The Girl smiled coldly. She seemed to have found an answer of some sort. "Shh," she said with a mischievous glint in her eyes as she leaned in and kissed him —

"*Hey*," he protested, grabbing her hair and trying to pull her off. However, his arms became feeble, and his legs began to tremble as his will dissolved into nothing. He could only observe in an odd mixture of fear and excitement as the Girl started making out heavily with him, gave him that which he wanted most, that which he was too embarrassed to accept willingly. She worked at him for what felt like ages and yet no time at all, and when she finally came up for air, she studied him intently, breathing heavily, as if overwhelmed by the situation, by her own emotions.

You are so *fresh. No wonder Ash spotted you.*

Bryce's mind was reeling. "You know Ash?" he asked, trying to keep his concentration.

The Girl, now showering his neck and shoulders with kisses, responded mentally: *Just finishing what she started.*

He wanted to ask her something else, but his mind became entangled again, filled to the brim with her essence. He focused instead on returning her embraces, and his hands became bolder—

She suddenly sobered and pulled away.

"Why are you stopping?" he asked, perplexed.

There was an odd expression on her face. She looked confused for a moment. Bryce got the feeling they were going too fast (too fast, for a dream?).

No, it's not that. The Girl took his hand, led him toward the hallway. *Let's make this exciting.*

Bryce heard her thoughts—a dream within a dream—and he acquiesced, but instead of heading for the staircase (as expected), the Girl went for the front door, opened it and stepped out into the night. He hardly had time to think about what

was happening before he was jogging with her, *au naturel*. He asked her where they were going, but she didn't answer. She merely moved slightly ahead of him, her bare feet making quiet slapping noises against the pavement. She led him out of the cul-de-sac and east along Lincoln. All the while he was splitting his attention between her bare backside and the well-lit street, which was, thankfully, deserted at this hour. However, that didn't mean that at any moment they wouldn't be spotted by late-night pedestrians—or worse, by the police.

"Hey," he called out, reaching for her as they reached the parking lot of a 24-hour liquor store. No one else was around, but—

"Here," the Girl said, stopping abruptly, facing him. She wrapped her arms around him, pulled him down onto the curb. "Let's do it here."

"What?" Bryce was incredulous. "Right here? This is crazy, this is nuts..." But there she went again, beginning her repeat performance, desperately kissing and groping him. Again, his willpower drained away even as an alarm siren went off in the distant recesses of his mind.

Relax. Just a dream, right?

Yes. Strange, twisted, wickedly exhilarating dream in which you and some strange girl are having the make-out session of the century in a liquor store parking lot.

It was too good to be true, though, for just as he started to let himself go, just as he started to respond in kind, he noticed the store entrance doors opening, two men exiting, no doubt immediately spotting the Girl and himself in the midst of their lascivious interaction, and *oh, no*—

—she sank her teeth into his neck, bit down hard, causing him to cry out in alarm as blood, warm and thick, spurted against his shoulder, his chest. His vision flashed white, the resulting pain an uncertain bi-product of an erotic dream gone horribly wrong.

That's for messing with Ash.

Bryce rolled out of the way, onto his hands and knees, panting, gasping for air —and jolting awake to find himself not back home in bed, but actually out in front of a 24-hour liquor store. He toppled forward onto the asphalt, cupping his hands protectively over his crotch, and immediately realized three things: one, the Girl with the Boy's Haircut had been the specter of a dream; two, he was buck naked; three, he was the center of attention for a pair of unamused store-owners who were looking at him with expressions of disgust on their faces.

Damn, he thought. *This is bad.*

Chapter 8

Two blocks southwest of Savanna High was Pacific Grove, an ultra-clean, ultra-snobby planned community that sat in the middle of the time-worn decadence that was Anaheim. Joshua, head drooped, hands stuffed in his pockets, walked quickly past neatly aligned cypress and impeccably trimmed hedgerows, past scooter-wielding children and lawn-tending landscapers. No one paid him any attention, nor did anyone seem to notice the unsightly stains on his lips.

Friday, like any other day of the week, usually found him home alone and feeling sorry for himself. However, today had been just a little different. Although he still felt like a wretch (that went without saying), there was one major difference: he wasn't hungry. Rather, he felt somewhat bloated, and just a little bit sick. Despite the afternoon warmth, he shivered, as if chilled by invisible snowfall. He would have donned his sweater, had he not left it lying crumpled on Heather's living room floor.

Heather, he thought, his gut writhing. That afternoon she'd merely been a nondescript face, just another cute girl he might have passed by without a second glance. He'd been waiting in line at Taco Bell; she'd been ahead of him, standing there with her backpack slung over one shoulder, gym shorts and cute pink cami both a size too small.

Fresh out of P.E. class.

He'd tried not to stare too much, tried to think of other things, his food coming soon...*stuff yourself, then go home and sleep the rest of the day away...but no, look. She's turning around, smiling at you, asking you if you've ever tried the quesadillas.*

It had been so long, he hadn't been sure if he still had it in him, but the hunger was fierce, and the fiasco in the boy's locker room had left him drained, in need of something more than his own essence.

Can't subsist forever on recycled qi.

So he'd reeled her in, complimenting her eyes, her face, telling her he wasn't normally this bold with girls, but she was just *so* pretty. Her boyfriend must be a lucky guy. What? No boyfriend? Aw, couldn't believe *that*...

In twenty minutes' time, quesadillas all but forgotten, he was walking with her to her parents' place in Pacific Cove, slipping in through the front door, and oh! the vibrant memories were coming back in a flood now as he saw himself embracing her without even making the effort to find the bedroom. She'd reciprocated his supposed affection, assuring him that her parents wouldn't return until after five, that she'd never done this sort of thing with a boy before, but for

some reason, now, with him...

So much better than your own. All this time...saving your own blood in little vials...not enough...not enough.

He'd told himself that he didn't have to feel bad about it as long as he pretended, as long as he played the part of an ordinary teenage boy fooling around with an ordinary teenage girl. After the first few kisses, he'd thrown everything he'd had at his victim so that there wasn't the slightest chance of her pulling back until it was all over. She was oblivious, of course, and so she made no move to stop him. Rather, she encouraged him, begging him, please, *please* do anything he wanted.

And he had. From kissing and nibbling to biting and tearing, he'd done everything his urges had demanded he do...and the blood, the potent rush of warm vitality as it spurted down his throat...the sheer ecstasy of it all nearly killed him on the spot.

Funny, Joshua thought, yanking himself back to the present, suddenly feeling his stomach turn. *Didn't think it would be that easy. She hadn't even realized what was happening until I was halfway to the door, pulling my shirt back on and...oh, Jesus. She's just sitting there like that, shaking and moaning as she looks down at what I've done to her, pain slowly sinking in, all this blood just seeping into the carpet, and...oh, no.*

He stumbled slightly, clutching his midsection as he felt his gut begin to clench up. It was like having eaten a pound of rotten meat.

Going to be sick...

He managed to control himself for another block, until he came to Lincoln, at which point he could no longer hold it in and hastily sought out an appropriate spot to empty the contents of his stomach. There was a liquor store across the street; he made a beeline for the rear of the building, where the dumpsters were. Then he vomited, spewing angry jets of vile fluid against the asphalt. Most of it splattered on his pants and sneakers.

No, jackass! You're being wasteful! Save some of it!

It was all too much, though. Going for months without tasting anyone but himself, and then suddenly devouring Heather, violating her—*raping* her. Forcing his will on her, making her do what he wanted, and all the while extracting her essence to satisfy himself.

And now? He was physically satisfied, yes, but he was also more disgusted than ever with the direction his life had suddenly taken. Never had he filched from someone so violently, so carelessly. But abstinence was colossally difficult, self-sufficiency horrendous while at the mercy of your own affliction. Over time Joshua had felt himself stretching thinner, the underlying ache festering into something that could no longer be ignored.

And now it had come to this.

Now, because of him, there was a girl named Heather who would soon be going through the same thing: the fevers, the shakes, the terrible midnight sweats—and that was if she survived the wound, if someone got her to the hospital before she bled to death.

Another life ruined because you don't give a damn whether or not you pass on your affliction to one person or one thousand people.

In utter misery, Joshua collapsed onto his knees, leaned against the wall for support as his stomach slowly settled itself. Every muscle in his body twitched, both from his release and from the terrible knowledge that he was now a criminal. Heather was a student at Savanna, and had probably spotted him once or twice before, though he didn't know her personally. There would be very little delay in pointing him out to the police. Once she figured out what had happened, there would be questions about the boy who'd sweet-talked his way into her home and then had his way with her.

Then again, maybe she would be one of the quiet ones, a silent sufferer like himself, one who was too horrified, too revolted by the truth to let anyone know about it. After all, parents, police, doctors, holy men...what did they know about the fever? Assuming you brought up the subject, how did you talk about it without sounding like a total nut case? Excuse me, but I have this problem, you see. I once shared with a girl and she gave me a kind of sickness. I'm not a vampire *per se*, but I *do* need to consume human blood for the *qi*. I have to do it on a regular basis, too, or else things get real bad real quick. I guess you could call it a communicable deficiency of some kind, but I sure as hell can't find anything about it in any medical encyclopedia. It's not a sexual thing, specifically, though sex is usually more conducive to tapping than walking up to someone and cheerfully asking, "Hey, mind if I suck your blood?" Or herding that same someone into a dark alley and attacking them outright. So, do I need a prescription for this, or can I get something over-the-counter?

Joshua eventually slumped into a sitting position, his back against the wall, his legs splayed. He watched the vomit slowly dry on his shoes as afternoon waned into evening, evening into night. Not once did anyone approach him, ask him if he was okay. No concerned friends, no concerned mother, who might have been wondering about her son's whereabouts at such a late hour, but whose "let the kid raise himself" mentality prevented any such physical intervention from occurring. As a child the freedom had been intoxicating; now it was more frightening than anything in the whole world.

It was nearly midnight when he finally decided to leave the alley. Wiping half-dried tears from his cheek and getting to his feet, he started toward the front of the store, where streetlights gave overexposed form to barren sidewalks, empty streets —and Bryce Powell, kneeling naked in the middle of the parking lot...?

"What the hell is this?" someone exclaimed.

Joshua had come out from the side of the building closest to the street, and there were a few low-cut hedges between him and the storefront, where a pair of clerks had suddenly emerged. He quickly squatted and scooted in close to the bushes so he could observe the scene incognito.

The man who'd first spoken was now shaking his fist angrily. "Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Whatever he's doing," replied his partner, with a dubious laugh, "he's doing it

in *your* parking lot, bro."

"Shut up and call the cops."

* * *

Despite the audacity of waking up to find himself exposed in public, Bryce discovered that the worst part of the entire evening came afterward, when he was back at home and sitting slumped on his parents' living room sofa. He was, thankfully, fully dressed now, and more or less fully recovered from his altered state, though his head still throbbed—and he was *not* looking forward to explaining himself.

The police had picked him up, listened to his babbled, apologetic story of unintentional somnambulism. They'd also tested his blood alcohol level, which had turned up nothing of consequence. As the parking lot had been vacant at the time, and as the store clerks weren't pressing charges, Bryce was shipped home with a stern warning and a blanket wrapped around his waist.

Now, alone with his parents and enduring an uncomfortable silence as the Powell family as a whole attempted to make sense of things, he might have just as easily crawled into a hole and died.

"Well," Julia said after a while, clearing her throat and checking Bryce's thermometer. "Your temperature's normal." She smiled half-heartedly.

Bryce didn't dare make eye contact, didn't dare do anything to invite that ominous, unasked question: *What* has *driven you to flaunt your bare bottom around the streets of Anaheim in the middle of the night?* Using his dream (the contents of which he'd kept entirely to himself, for obvious reasons) as an excuse was out of the question, so he sat and sulked, awaited whatever punishment was to be dealt.

The trouble was, it was so unlike him to do anything of this sort. As a child, he'd gone through his ornery phases—throwing mud balls at girls, staying up late to watch dirty movies, using Daniel's power tools without permission—but never had he *really* gone over the edge. There was no reference point for tonight's transgression.

"Well," Julia said again. She bit her lip, looked at Daniel, who sat across the room atop an unopened box. He shrugged and gave her a your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine look. She faced Bryce again and took hold of his arm. "Doesn't look infected, but maybe I should run you over to the doctor tomorrow anyhow."

"I don't see what good that'll do," Bryce said, not wanting to have to tell someone all the gritty details of one, his dream, and two, his encounter with Ashley. "I feel fine. Really, I do. It was probably something I ate."

Julia looked concerned, but didn't know what else to say at the moment. She sighed and got up. "Okay, then. Off to bed."

Bryce complied. As he climbed the stairs, he noticed that Daniel and Julia remained in the living room. Undoubtedly, they were about to have a Private Talk.

When he was upstairs and out of sight (but still within earshot), he paused to

listen:

"What do you think?"

"Christ, Julia. I think he's fine. He's just...seventeen. He's mad at me for shipping us here so suddenly. You saw how he was during the trip. I don't think we said a single word to each other the whole time. He's rebelling—though by now the neighbors must think we're all a bunch of misfits."

"It's not like him, though. You think he'd really do something like this to get attention?'

"When I was seventeen, I did a lot of things that 'weren't like me.' I pulled stunts all the time to get back at my old man."

"But why wouldn't he tell us if something was wrong?"

"Come on. How easy was it for *you* to just walk up to your parents and have a heart to heart? Besides, Bry's a self-serve kind of kid. I think he has to work this out on his own before anything else."

"We just have to make sure he doesn't become a deviant in the meantime."

"He's not going to become a deviant."

"I was joking, Daniel."

"I know."

A moment of silence. Daniel clearing his throat, and then:

"Mark's offer still stands for tomorrow's barbecue. I was going to make an excuse, some reason we couldn't go, but he's got some kids of his own, and a couple of friends have kids close to Bry's age. Maybe we should make an appearance."

"Gee, it's not like I had any unpacking to do or anything."

"Christ, I can't stand the guy either. He'll probably bring up the fact that we're his beneficiaries a dozen times before we get to the coleslaw, but, well, in a hundred years, who's going to care? Besides, we can finish settling in on Sunday."

"You make it sound about as interesting as a dentist appointment..."

Bryce left the hall, retreated to his bedroom, where he closed and locked the door. *Show your junk to a couple of liquor store clerks, get invited to a barbecue. So, that's how it works.* He sat at the edge of his bed and groaned inwardly, feeling the heat coming off his face in waves. It had nothing to do with fever, though. This was shame, embarrassment, frustration—all rolled into one conglomerate emotion he couldn't begin to understand. Even in the privacy of his own room he felt as if the eyes of the entire neighborhood were on him, peeking through the window, seeing him shame-faced and bare-assed despite his clothing.

Mom thinks I'm sick, Dad thinks I'm being a wise-ass...and me? I don't know what's going on.

One thing was for sure: he was dreading Monday afternoon, when he would have to sit in the same classroom with the Girl, the inspiration behind his teenage brain's latest erotic indulgence. Naturally, he wasn't so naïve as to believe that other people could actually read his mind or seed his dreams. It was just...well, it was like the rare occasions when he would be masturbating in the afternoon (instead of doing his homework), and his mother would knock on his bedroom

door to talk to him about whatever it was she needed to talk about. He would hastily fasten his pants before letting her in. She would then proceed to sit on his bed, oblivious to what he'd been doing in that very spot not thirty seconds ago, and talk for what seemed like hours as he stood at the opposite end of the room and fidgeted. She didn't know (at least, he hoped to God she didn't), but he did, and it was almost as bad as having gotten caught.

Thump.

Bryce looked toward the window.

Thump-thump.

There was a small dark splotch against the glass. Someone was hurling tiny mud cakes, trying to get his attention. He went to the window, slid it open and stuck his head outside. Joshua was there, still dressed in his school clothes and standing in the middle of the driveway. He gazed around himself cautiously and motioned for Bryce to come outside.

As if one aberration for the night wasn't enough.

Bryce considered merely closing the window and going right to bed, but Josh looked adamant about their meeting *now*, so he sighed and gestured toward the backyard.

Daniel and Julia didn't spend much time downstairs. After a few minutes of idle conversation, making the midnight rounds of all the locks and light switches, they turned in for the night—at which point Bryce slipped quietly from his bedroom, down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out into the backyard.

Joshua was waiting there for him, an unearthly specter masked in twisted flesh and smelling faintly of something sweet and sour. Vomit, maybe. He had his backpack with him, as if he'd decided not to go home after school.

Maybe he didn't have a home to go to.

Bryce cleared his throat. "Hi, Josh. What's...how've you been?"

"Okay," said Joshua. He seemed preoccupied. "Sorry if I woke you up."

"It's okay. I was awake anyway."

"Yeah...I, um, sort of saw what you did at the liquor store."

Bryce's face flared crimson. "Oh, God—"

"I didn't come over to make fun. I have a question for you, and I want you to answer it honestly."

No, I'm not an exhibitionist. "Okay."

Joshua took a deep breath, let it out, and stared Bryce square in the face. "Can you see me?"

"What?"

"Can you *see* me?"

"Of course I can. You're standing right there."

Joshua rolled his eyes in exasperation. "No, I mean...do I look like any other regular guy, or is my skin all gross and messed up?"

Bryce grimaced slightly, shrugged. "Um, well, yeah. There's that."

"And I looked like this when you first saw me, right? *Before* you got bitten?"

"Er, yeah. Is there some reason why you would've looked different?"

Josh smiled in apparent amusement. “You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“You’re one of us. One of the afflicted.”

This was getting strange. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Josh replied, his smile broadening as he folded his arms. “I was just thinking we could help each other out, if you get my drift.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then we should talk.”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“This will only take a minute.”

With a sigh, Bryce acquiesced—

—and that’s when things got interesting.

Chapter 9

The evening shadows had long since claimed the interior of Kyna's clubhouse when she finally decided she could move freely again. She opened her eyes, uncrossed her legs and wiped the sweat from her face as she slid from her bed and started pacing. She was still fully dressed, having begun her meditation session right after school.

Initially, everything had gone smoothly. She'd lain on her bed, relaxed every muscle from head to toe, remained so perfectly calm and still that eventually she wasn't aware of her body at all. She'd sent her feelers out across the city, allowed her aura to expand outward along every street, through every alley, between every crack and crevice of suburbia. Floating bodiless above a murky sea of flickering, glowing souls, she could discern the brighter ones from the insubstantial ones. The former often came in pairs: distinctive energy caused by strenuous exercise or intense emotions. The latter were usually the lonely souls, the deeply contemplative or disenfranchised people who merely floated aimlessly on the spiritual sea instead of swimming in any given direction.

Bryce's soul had been a lone point of light, unusually brighter than the others —perhaps because of his fever (a biological stress that drew heavily on one's essence), or perhaps because there was simply more of him packed into that handsome bod of his. She could see why Ashley had fixated on him in the first place: it would have been hard *not* to.

Herself and Bryce, next. With him in his mind, the two of them together in his parents' imagined living room, her essence had intertwined with his, and she'd worked him over, gotten him all excited, causing the energy to radiate off him in waves. Her intention had been (as it was with all the other duds she'd tapped) to bring him to his most vulnerable point and then feed off that sweet, abundant potency as it came gushing out of him like water from a geyser. It wasn't so much a sexual thing, though the circumstances had certainly been erotic. She hadn't meant to become entangled in Bryce's typically male libido, but it had happened anyway. She'd allowed herself to become too entangled in his essence, so much of it, all at once—

—I'd almost gone over the edge.

A pang of worry caused her stomach to turn. She slowed her pacing and concentrated.

Something went wrong, but you got a handle on it. Pulled back before it was too late.

Of course, seeing a cute guy without his clothes on—even if by way of the astral

plane— provided a basic thrill, but it was something Kyna normally kept in the background, something she enjoyed on the side as she focused her main energies on getting the job done.

I let him get to me, forgot he's just a random guy—a means of sustaining yourself, that's all. Don't forget that this isn't love, there's never love. Only you against them. Take what you need, keep yourself alive, move on. She almost felt nauseous. She wasn't supposed to want guys. Admire the cute ones, yes, perhaps even play with them during sup—but always at a distance, always for a good laugh.

You don't want Bryce, because wanting a guy means giving yourself to him, and that also means giving him control.

With Joshua she'd made such an error, and it had cost her dearly, convinced her that being paranoid was far better than being victimized. Nevertheless, she was still simultaneously intrigued and repulsed by Bryce. He was the first boy to have invoked such a response from her. Well, the first since Joshua.

Funny. So similar in certain ways, different in others. He's cute—really cute—and he seems like such a nice guy, a guy who treats girls and relationships seriously. Even in his dreams he was thinking about the consequences—but then, he was only worrying about being caught in his parents' living room. How would he have reacted if I'd come to him alone, somewhere he would have felt confident? Just a dream, yes, but boys tend to translate their dreams both ways when it comes to fantasy and reality.

She shivered again, feeling the pang deep in her gut—something wickedly delicious and frighteningly overwhelming. She gritted her teeth, clamped her hands into fists, refused to light her candles. After all, she'd been living alone in the clubhouse, apart from her mother, for years. Such solitude had often provided a sense of safety and protection from all that was wrong with the world. No sense in giving in to every little phobia known to mankind simply because of a small screw-up.

Don't start acting like a baby. Analyze your mistake, realize you did him all wrong. Too much crazed abandon, not enough reserve. But that's okay. You caught yourself, and now you know better. You're not that foolish girl anymore, looking for a guy's arms to hold you, kiss you, listening for him to tell you he loves you and wants to take you away from everything bad—only to wake up one day and discover he's been using you all along. You're smarter than that now, right? Right. Get your clothes, go and take a shower. Move on.

She left the clubhouse, performed her usual security ritual of testing the locks and standing for a moment in the open air to listen for noises coming from the house. The kitchen light was on, and through the window (covered partially by a half-drawn curtain) she could see her mother, still wearing her work clothes and compiling her dinner from a bag of frozen green beans and a two-thirds empty bottle of tequila.

No sign of *him*.

Kyna entered, letting the screen door slide shut with a muffled bang. For a moment she stood at the entrance to the kitchen and watched her mother move

back and forth between the sink and stove. The ever-present mess was still there, driving the flies nuts, only now there was the added bonus of Mrs. Miller's cigarette smoke wafting about, replacing the putrid scent of rotting food with that of smoldering tobacco.

"Hi, Mom," Kyna said after a while.

Mrs. Miller jumped slightly. "Oh, it's you."

Kyna moved into the kitchen a bit. She clutched her bundle of clothing tight against her hip. "Just stopping in for a shower."

"Oh, cool. I bought some new soaps at the dollar store. There's rosemary, tangerine, and something with oatmeal, I think. I have a whole bag under the sink."

"Cool." Kyna shifted from one foot to the other. After an uncomfortable moment of not knowing what to say, she started backing out of the room. "I guess I'll see you later, then."

Mrs. Miller waved her hand awkwardly and stubbed out her cigarette on the counter top. "Hang on a sec, baby. Let me get a look at you." She approached Kyna and clasped her shoulders. "Geez, you're getting so big. Where's my little girl gone to?"

Kyna found it hard to smile; in such close proximity she could smell the liquor on her mother's breath, could see the little wrinkles and blemishes of her dried-out face.

Christ. A thirty-something shouldn't look this old. You look like a reptile—and you wonder why I try not to come inside the house unless I really need to.

She sighed, reached out and ran her fingers through Mrs. Miller's stringy locks. "You should take better care of yourself, Mom."

Her mother smiled wistfully, the wrinkles around her eyes becoming crevices. "Oh, baby, I know. One of these days, when I have the time, I promise to pamper myself, okay?"

Yeah, right. "Catch you later, Mom."

Kyna turned away, left her mother in the kitchen, left her to her green beans and booze. Down the hall, into the bathroom, and out of her clothes next, biting her lip as she quickly stepped into the tub and turned on the water so that salty tears and frigid tap blended into one.

She sometimes cried like this, and she didn't know why. After all, it was her mother's life, her mother's choice to become what she was. It wasn't up to Kyna to make her into what she wanted, even though she was oftentimes tempted to do just that, to somehow hone her aural skills so that she could influence the woman's everyday decisions, keep her on the right path, 24/7.

But in order to do that, you'd have to be...God.

Lately even He didn't seem all that interested in the well-being of the Miller family.

Listen to yourself. Fixating on things you'll never be able to change. Let it go and move on. You've got better things to do than—

She froze suddenly. Mind, body, and soul came to a shuddering halt as she

heard a masculine voice—*his* voice—on the other side of the bathroom door (which she now realized she'd forgotten to lock).

Please, no...

His full name was Steven Dedman, though Kyna preferred to call him "Dead Man," and he was what Mrs. Miller thought of as a husband, even though these days he only ever came around on weekends, when he was too drunk to want anything but a quick lay and a good night's rest. Oftentimes he would leave money—wads of fives, tens, sometimes twenties—scattered on the bed or dresser, his way of "helping out." He liked his relationships informal. He also liked Kyna—*liked* her, not *loved* her. To be clear, he'd never abused her sexually, but he *had* screwed her over in just about every other way humanly possible. Her and her mother both.

Kyna gripped the soap tightly in her hands, watching through the shower curtain as Dead Man came waltzing right into the bathroom. It was obvious that she was in here, yet he entered anyway—trapping her unprepared and vulnerable.

So damned vulnerable.

He paused for a moment, seeing her clothes on the toilet seat, looking up again, gazing at her as he put two and two together. She could see him through the shower curtain (which was transparent between the floral pattern), could make out the details of his curly hair and rugged face, the leather jacket and jeans that he always wore. She knew that he could see her as well, that he was squinting as hard as he could, trying to make out all her details.

That's right, isn't it, sweet thing? It's been years since I've seen my little girl, but look at you now. All grown up.

Kyna remained perfectly still. At first she tried to convince herself that she was just hearing his thoughts, hearing the random debris that filtered through any deadbeat's head when he saw a naked teenage girl in the shower, but she knew better, and it made her blood run cold despite her best efforts to remain in control of the situation.

Dead Man chuckled out loud and calmly removed her clothes from the toilet seat, placed them atop the counter. Then he lifted the seat, undid the fly of his jeans, and relieved himself.

Kyna dared not close her eyes, yet she refused to let herself see anymore of this grotesque display. She retreated mentally, leaning back against her own will for support, bracing herself for the worst—trying to find the smallest bit of comfort while the water cascaded down her neck and shoulders—seemingly in time with the sound of Dead Man's urine splashing against the inside of the toilet bowl. Any minute now his hand would reach for the shower curtain, slowly pull it aside to reveal the prize.

She clenched her fists ever tighter, closed her eyes and sent him a silent mental spear: *You so much as think about opening that curtain and I swear I'll beat the living daylights out of you.*

Another chuckle from Dead Man.

I know you hear me, she sent, dangerously close to succumbing completely to her own fear.

Dead Man never responded, mentally or otherwise. He didn't need to, for his presence, the knowledge that he was there and obviously in control (she would *not* get out of the shower until he left), was enough. It was all he needed, to be the only man she dared not confront—at least, not since she was thirteen and had learned to either fend for herself or be forever enslaved to those with the willpower to control the ignorant. He'd backed off, once, perhaps acknowledging her burgeoning adulthood—but not accepting it. There was always that back door.

That's right. And someday, if it suits me, I'll put out that little bit of extra effort, I'll pull aside that shower curtain and redeem what's rightfully mine.

For a moment Kyna feared this night, of all nights, would be the night. The past few years had merely been a hiatus—his appetite had undoubtedly grown as she'd grown, from a girl into a young woman. If he wanted to, he could reap the harvest this very moment and she would be powerless to stop him.

She waited. It seemed like forever before she heard Dead Man zip up his jeans and leave the bathroom without even washing his hands. Afterward she took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and discovered she'd dug her fingers so deep into the soap that the entire bar was now mush.

See? That's why you don't look for love, whether it's Dead Man, Joshua, Bryce, or any other guy. Never. Ever.

Chapter 10

"There are two types of people in the world: duds and initiates. Duds are the ordinary, everyday people who don't know anything about auras and willpower and all that. Initiates are the ones who know how to control their own willpower in such a way that they can extend their auras outward and affect other people. Not exactly like mind control, but close. The initiates control the duds, the rich control the poor, and that's how society works. Got it?"

"Not really," Bryce replied with a yawn. He sat cross-legged on the chilled concrete plane that served as the Powells' backyard, while Joshua (evidently too keyed up, even at this unwieldy hour) paced in front of him. Both boys spoke in subtle tones, though the subject matter of their conversation was anything but subtle. In fact, it was the strangest post-midnight discussion Bryce had ever had. "Look. This is interesting and all, but—"

Joshua waved his hand, sighed. After a moment's pause he said, "Okay, how about this: You ever wonder why you do certain things when you're with a friend or a group of friends? Like peer pressure. They tell you to do something, and you know you don't want to do it, you think they're nuts and stupid and idiots—but you end up doing it anyway without really knowing why?"

"Okay. Peer pressure."

"Yeah, but what *is* peer pressure?"

"You tell me."

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Okay, let me put it another way. What if somewhere in America there was this crazy little town where the people were really good with the knack of persuasion? I'm talking so good that the initiates—the *elites*—knew how to control and feed off the duds without them even knowing it?"

Bryce snapped his finger. "Ah. Let me guess: Anaheim."

"You're being sarcastic."

"I'm tired." *And you're nuts.* He moved to get up, but Joshua put a hand on his shoulder.

"All right, then. Let's talk about you and Ashley."

Finally, Bryce's curiosity was piqued. He sat back down. "How did you know —"

"There's only one girl at Savanna High who goes around biting people in broad daylight. She's a little far-gone—thinks she's an initiate, but she's more of a junkie."

Bryce raised an eyebrow. "So, then…I'm a dud?"

"Not necessarily," replied Joshua, shaking his head and staring off into the night

sky. "Ash bit you. Unless you've been tapped before, your blood's now been tainted. It's sort of like an infection, or an STD, but it's not anything that any doctor knows about. You get the fever, and after that you're not really sick, you're hungry." He looked at Bryce. "It's what drives the power struggle. In order to have control over someone, you have to have more willpower, more energy than they do. You could drink buckets full of Ginseng tea, I guess, but if you want a real kick, it's got to be blood. That's why, in case you're wondering, Ash bit you: she was hungry, and you were full of untainted energy."

Bryce felt an uncomfortable itch at the back of his neck, and it suddenly struck him that he was attempting to understand the workings of a completely delusional mind. And yet...

"Vampires," he said, rubbing his temples and thinking he should have told Joshua to get lost the moment he'd spotted him outside his bedroom window.

"Not necessarily," Joshua replied. "I mean, people like us, we don't sleep in coffins or anything, and we don't melt in sunlight."

Bryce shook his head. "Dude. Do you realize how crazy you sound?"

"Yeah, but think about it. The same day you're bitten, you're out running around commando style and getting into all kinds of trouble—and I bet you've never even *thought* about doing something like that in public before. You can't understand why the hell you'd do such a thing—yet you did it, and Ash was calling the shots. Am I right?"

True, the day's events had been atypical, to say the least, but this? An explanation involving initiates, duds, suburban vampires who drank blood in order to beef themselves up? *Does he think I'm that gullible? He probably happened to spot me out there tonight, he probably has some kind of indecent exposure fetish.* And besides, Ash hadn't been the one in his dream.

He cleared his throat. "I think you're getting a little too personal."

Joshua wrung his hands. "You're missing the point."

Bryce started getting up again. "Josh, it's late. I think you should go home."

As before, Joshua physically restrained him, only this time there was a hint of desperation in his eyes. "Okay, never mind about Ash for now. Let's talk about you."

"Josh—"

"You can see me—the real me, and not the illusion I've cast. I'm an initiate, and you can see me. No one's ever told me they can see my real face unless they were also an initiate—it takes skill. That means you've got something, whether you know it or not. It also means you're broadcasting mad kilowatts out across the city for all the ravenous freaks like Ash to pick up on."

"So?"

"So, you're fresh meat. They'll come looking for you—but I can help."

Bryce shook his head, his expression incredulous. "Are you for real?"

"After what happened in front of the liquor store, why is it so hard for you to believe me?"

"I don't know. Maybe you and Ashley are in this together. I don't intend to be

the butt of your little practical joke."

"You think I'm just screwing around?"

"Show me some proof."

Joshua bit his lip. "Well, it's not like we're talking levitation and flashing lights. It's all willpower, influential thoughts, and stuff like that."

"Well," Bryce continued, "then make me do something. Influence me."

"Okay, but just remember: you asked."

For a moment Joshua fell silent as he stared Bryce down. He clenched his fists, set his jaw in grim determination, and made a face, as if he were trying to mold the contents of his colon into a collection of clay miniatures. Nothing happened (that Bryce could discern). When Joshua started breaking into a sweat, Bryce shook his head and started toward the house.

"Goodnight, Josh."

"Wait! You can't go yet." Josh blocked his path.

"Why not?"

"Because, um, you need me."

Bryce made a face.

Joshua pushed on, though he was beginning to stammer. "You're going t-to run into some unsavory characters who'll t-treat you royally—but all they're after is your *qi*. I can t-teach you how to defend yourself in exchange for...for your..."

"Are you saying you want to drink my blood?"

"What I'm *saying* is, Ash bit you, and pretty soon you're going to have the same, uh, needs she does. The same hunger we all have. You're going to want to tap someone in order to get your fill, and you might make some bad decisions. But if we shared with each other, there'd be no risk, no problems trying to find other friends that we can trust in order to get our fix."

Bryce wasn't sure if he should scowl or laugh. "Look. I'm going to bed. And I'm not into swapping bodily fluids, by the way. I don't know what I did to make you think that, but..." He paused, unsure of what else to say. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

Making one last attempt, Joshua grabbed his arm for the third time that night. "Please! I'm not making this up. You blow me off and you'll end up like all the rest, all the other newbies who get sucked into becoming mindless duds, fodder for the initiates. I can help protect you from them."

Bryce shrugged out of his grasp, pushed him back a few steps. "This isn't funny anymore. I'm not a dud, and I'm not an idiot, okay? Got it?" *And I'll slam your face into the ground if you touch me again.*

Joshua immediately sobered and let him pass into the house. When he was closing the kitchen door behind him, he heard:

"Bye, Bryce. I tried."

Chapter 11

Pacific Grove's community center was located at the southernmost edge of the neighborhood. Featuring an elaborate lounge room, a pair of tennis courts, and a sprawling swimming pool, it was likely the single most prominent example of the local residents' financial clout and subsequent flamboyance.

Bryce felt out-of-place from the start. Not only were he and his parents newcomers, but they were also in a social class not quite on par with everyone else, and it was obvious. The men, dressed in khakis and polo shirts, were gathered around a humongous grill; the women, sporting skimpy bathing suits and Ray Ban shades, lounged nearby and sipped iced tea.

God, Bryce thought, grabbing his swim shorts as he got out of the car. *So these are the people Dad needs to impress. I almost feel sorry for the guy.*

Mark, draped in typical fruit bowl-pattern attire, welcomed the Powells into the group and introduced everyone. He distributed cans of ice-cold soda from the cooler as Bryce patiently allowed Daniel and Julia to showcase their offspring like a prize trophy.

"Seventeen, you say?" asked Edward, the tallest and slickest of Mark's companions. He took a sip from his beer and approached Bryce, testing the firmness of the boy's shoulder with his hand. Then he faced Daniel and grinned. "The kid's pretty bulked up. On the football team?"

"Free weights, sir," Bryce replied. "Just like to keep the boys in shape, is all." He flexed his left arm slightly.

The women cooed; the men chuckled appropriately. Edward took another sip of beer, gave Bryce one more look-over and nodded. "Well, I can always use an extra hand down at the warehouse, if you're interested. Naturally, it would be under-the-table pay, but it'd be spending money, a little something for you to put in the ol' Powell College Fund."

Bryce nodded and shrugged. He noted the controlled look of tolerance on his father's face. *Thinking about how nice it is to have a group of his peers automatically assuming he can't balance a checkbook without divine intervention. Nice way to start things off.*

"Help yourselves to anything," Mark offered, gesturing at the various ice chests. To Bryce he said, "I'm sure you'll want to cool off. The kids are all in the pool. The cabana's unlocked."

Bryce nodded and left the adult camp, crossed from the neatly-trimmed grass of the park area to the sparkling-clean concrete of the pool deck. There was a slightly uncomfortable moment as he surveyed the water and saw that there were indeed a

handful of teenagers (three boys, three girls) splashing and playing in the swimming pool—none of whom he knew. Several of them called out friendly greetings and splashed jets of water in his direction. One, a blond girl wearing a liberal bikini, called out to him. She swam to the edge, climbed up onto the deck.

"It's me, Sheryl," she said.

Sheryl. For a moment Bryce's memory betrayed him.

"From school, silly!" She slapped him gently against the chest and slicked back her wet tresses. "Don't you remember?"

It took a moment before recognition set in. "Oh, yeah. The counseling office... yeah." Fearing another hormonal outbreak, he blushed ever so slightly.

She smiled and stepped in close for a hug. "Small world, huh?"

"Yeah." Bryce embraced her briefly, her front soaking the fabric of his T-shirt as she pressed against him. He certainly didn't mind; the scent of her banana-coconut sun screen seemed to have an intoxicating effect. A quick glance over her shoulder didn't reveal any jealous boyfriends supervising the proceedings, but to be on the safe side, he stepped away politely and chuckled, pulling off his shirt (vaguely aware that in doing so, he was actually flirting). He felt the slightest rush of exhilaration —his motions had less to do with preparing for a swim and more to do with his sudden desire to impress an exceedingly cute girl. "No sense in keeping this on now," he said.

Sheryl smiled appreciatively at his abdominals. "Nice."

Bryce swallowed. He'd instantly been transported into an entirely different state of mind. It was like being back in the counseling office all over again. He was smitten, enamored, intoxicated—boiling inside his skin. The whole purpose of his being here today had suddenly been narrowed to a single focal point: Sheryl.

"Want to play?" she asked, nodding at the swimming pool.

"Yeah," Bryce replied, rolling his tongue in his mouth, which had just gone dry. He held up his swim shorts. "I'll see y'all in a sec."

He went into the cabana to change, then joined everyone else in the pool. They had an informal game of water polo going.

Charlie, the tallest and lankiest of the boys, tossed him the ball and said, "You serve."

The game lasted the better part of an hour. This gave Bryce the opportunity to assess his make-out options, as he realized, through something of a fevered haze, he'd come to an indirect decision not to leave the community center today without at least a kiss from Sheryl. Though it was hardly his usual method of courtship, he soon found himself juggling his attention between the game and Sheryl's bikini bottoms, which seemed to be in a constant wedgied state.

Bryce learned everyone's names. He also learned that Charlie was most likely Sheryl's boyfriend. Every so often, he would catch them playfully brushing against each other, exchanging affectionate looks, and so forth. Yet whenever the opportunity presented itself, she teased Bryce as well: innocent smiles, "accidental" touches, outright backing into him and wiggling her bottom whenever they passed close.

The funny thing was, she wasn't necessarily his type. Outrageously pretty, with a bright, blemish-free complexion and a 24 Hour Fitness figure—which was good, for sure, but not the absolute crux of Bryce's tastes. For him, it was always some minute feature, some unique and oft-ignored quality about a girl that got his attention. Nikki, with her auburn locks and freckled face, had been a little on the skinny side, but it had been her brilliant cerulean eyes and full, pouting lips that had attracted him in the first place. She'd been so...expressive. Sheryl's lips were thin, less pronounced; it was the ever-present look of mischief gleaming in her eyes that gave her that extra something special.

The game ended around noon as Mark, waving a greasy spatula in the air, announced that it was chow time. The youths collected their meals on paper plates and spread their towels out on the concrete so they could sit in a circle, apart from the adults, as they ate. Bryce timed it so that he and Sheryl were sitting together; Charlie, obviously unaware of any amorous intentions toward his girl, sat on the other side of the circle and cracked crude jokes with one of the other boys.

Not particularly hungry, Bryce sipped a Sprite and lounged on his side as Sheryl and one of the other girls asked him questions.

"So," began Sheryl. "Like, is it all cactus and guys in cowboy hats and tight jeans in Texas?"

"We've got shopping malls and movie theaters and running water, if that's what you mean."

The girls giggled.

"Does everyone have an accent like you?"

"Some people do."

"How come you moved to Anaheim?"

"My dad's job."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope."

"A girlfriend?"

It was Sheryl's friend who'd asked this question, though Sheryl herself was quite attentive.

Bryce studied his soda can. "I used to."

"Why'd you break up?" asked Sheryl. Her body heat seemed to radiate outward in all directions at once.

"She broke it off. She wanted to date some guy who was on the football team."

"Sounds like a bitch to me," interjected Charlie from across the way. Evidently he'd been paying more attention than his demeanor had first implied.

Bryce ignored him, continued focusing on Sheryl as he answered. "It was no big deal. There just wasn't enough to keep us together, I guess."

Charlie didn't seem to get the point. "But it's got to hurt a little, right? I mean to know that she's down there in Texas right now doing things, going places, talking about you, her *ex*, with this new guy." He leaned back casually. "If *my* woman ever left me, it'd be by a court order."

Sheryl reached into her cup and removed an ice cube, which she hurled at him.

"Dork!"

If your "woman" leaves you, thought Bryce, *it'll be because she's sick and tired of being owned by a stick figure.*

Charlie got up, walked over to where Sheryl was and pulled her into a standing position so that he could wrap his arms around her waist. Then he shifted so that he was between her and Bryce.

Bryce turned the other way, nearly gagged at the display. *Little conceited twig boy, thinks he's all high and mighty because he has the hottest chick here.*

An intensity rose within him, something he hadn't been fully aware of until the moment he caught sight of a large wasp, buzzing about the concrete at the edge of the pool. He latched onto the insect mentally, following it with his gaze, focusing the heat from behind his eyelids into an invisible tractor beam. He imagined the wasp suddenly becoming enraged, filled with disdain for anorexic, overbearing boys. Turning about now, flying directly at Charlie, fastening itself on his pale leg, stinger poised above tender flesh and—

"Ouch!" Charlie cried with a start. He let go of Sheryl and swatted at his leg with his hand.

Bryce jerked as well, for he'd fallen into something of a haze during the whole ordeal. Now that it was over, he felt as if a cord of some sort had been cut. He blinked, watching the now-dead wasp as it fell to the ground.

"Damn," groaned Charlie, wincing. "That hurt."

The others laughed at him; he stuck his tongue out and went for the restroom.

Bryce blinked several times, tried to clear his head as he looked from Charlie to Sheryl, who was watching him very closely now. *Like she knows...like she's reading my mind...like she can hear me wondering what just happened, if I did it or not.*

"We're going to toss the Frisbee around," announced one of the girls.

Sheryl declined to participate, and the others dissipated. With Charlie away treating his bite, she and Bryce were left alone together on their towels.

"Good one," she giggled, tapping her foot against Bryce's. There was a smirk on her face—it had been there throughout the entire ordeal.

"Good...what?" asked Bryce, still trying to figure out what had just happened. Surely he didn't think he'd somehow willed the wasp to sting Charlie? And yet, there was still the intensity flowing through him, the excited assuredness that was making it increasingly difficult to organize his thoughts.

Sheryl grabbed his hand, pulled him up. "Let's get lost."

Out of one reverie and into another, he followed her into the cabana, where she immediately wrapped herself around him and initiated a frenzied make-out session. He acceded without question, frantic, almost desperate. It didn't matter that at any moment someone might enter the cabana and find them here; he only knew that he was overwhelmed by his own primal need to achieve acceptance, companionship—like in the dream with the Girl with the Boy's Haircut, only this was no dream. Sheryl was real and living and squirming exquisitely under his touch as he started removing her bikini—

—the cabana door swung open.

Sheryl yelped and reeled backwards.

Bryce stumbled to his feet; as quickly as the fever had engulfed him, it now dissipated as he came face to face with a very annoyed Charlie.

Uh-oh.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Charlie hollered, lunging forward —though his outrage wasn't directed at Bryce, whom he merely shoved aside as he grabbed Sheryl and hauled her to her feet. "I told you not to play around with duds like him!"

"I can do whatever I want to, Charlie!"

"Oh, I see how it is! I'm just *so* average and uninteresting that you just *had* to run off with the first bone-headed, knuckle-dragging grunt who lumbered your way? Real original, Sheryl!"

"Bryce is *not* bone-headed!"

"God, you're like a nympho or something! I don't *believe* you!"

"Screw you! You don't own me! Let go!"

Sheryl punched and kicked and twisted out of Charlie's grasp. This led to a mild scuffle in which each of the two insisted on the other's "overreacting."

Bryce, for his part, could only watch in absolute astonishment as he scooted clumsily toward the opposite end of the cabana. He could hear footsteps approaching from outside—most likely the adults coming to see what the ruckus was about—and he felt his heart leap into his throat, for he knew the day's outcome would undoubtedly be a repeat of last night.

Wonderful, he thought. *In trouble again.*

Chapter 12

Doing what you don't want to do; that's what Saturday afternoon had been about. Unfortunately for Bryce, clarification had come only after the ordeal in the cabana, where Charlie and Sheryl's heated argument had attracted the attention of every parent within a mile radius.

"You seem to have an affinity for being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Daniel had said during the car ride home—at which point Julia had sighed and donned the role of patient mediator, though she too was undoubtedly concerned about her son's recent uncharacteristic behavior.

"Just drive, honey," she'd said, gently stroking her husband's shoulder. "You can talk it over with him later."

Daniel had given her a look as if to say, *Gee, thanks. Let* me *do the dirty work.*

At home, Bryce had sat on the floor and endured the obligatory lecture: "Look, I know you're trying to settle in, you're trying to get a handle on life at seventeen, and suddenly your old man decides to flip you on your head with the move and all. Now you want to get back at me for moving us out here on a moment's notice. Fine. I'd probably do the same thing to my dad—but don't...don't screw up your own life just because of...of *this*." Daniel had gestured at the bed and boxes. "Or because of *me*. Don't let it affect your judgment. The last thing you need is an unplanned pregnancy, or to pick up a couple of herpes simply because you want to get even with daddy."

"I'm not trying to get back at you for anything," Bryce had responded, though any sort of conviction was lost in his own confusion over the matter. *Let him spout off. It'll be over quicker. It'll give me time to think.*

In the shower now, still blushing from the memory of his tryst with Sheryl, the aftertaste of too much toothpaste and mouthwash burning his tongue, Bryce processed the day's events, fretted over having made out with a girl he now realized he had no interest in whatsoever.

Not how it was back in the cabana, he thought, recalling the fevered haze that had led him on. *A crush from out of nowhere. I was horny, she knew it—and I let her screw around with me.*

Granted, girls caught his attention all the time, and often for reasons that had to do with little more than the typical breasts-and-butt paradigm. But there was supposed to be a certain amount of reserve when deciding who to mess around with and who to politely decline. Today he'd gotten hot and heavy with a girl he hadn't even known, and it frightened him. He'd deviated from the norm.

I'm not myself, he thought, stepping out of the tub. In front of the mirror, he

watched his reflection carefully, treated it like someone else entirely. *Not today, not last night with the Girl. Ticking off Mom and Dad, ticking off* myself. *Am I really mad enough about the move to do these things as...as a protest? Is this who I really am?*

"Told you so," he imagined Joshua saying as he dried himself off. He imagined the mutant boy sitting there in front of him, on the toilet bowl, shaking his head in disdain.

Told me what? Bryce thought. *That you were right? I don't want you to be right, because that means people really* are *screwing around with me using some kind of mental magic, and my only insight is coming from someone who wants to drink my —holy crap, I'm arguing with myself.*

He sighed and left the bathroom, went to his room, where he remained all afternoon. Julia offered him dinner at one point—a turkey sandwich and a glass of iced tea—but he merely nibbled at it. He was too engrossed in his own thoughts, too immersed in an uncertain connection between Joshua and Charlie's use of the word "dud." A part of him also insisted on lingering on the wasp incident as well, but he knew it was impossible to have controlled an insect like that.

You're not a stupid ten-year-old, he reminded himself on more than one occasion. *Don't blame your mistakes on some imaginary super power, like Josh. Fess up and do something to change it.*

Without metaphysical excuses, it boiled down to himself, a newbie in Anaheim and a prime target for whatever twisted sense of humor the locals happened to share. He'd not assimilated correctly; his first day at school, his mannerisms—his thick accent—had resulted in his being labeled as a southern-fried Texas yokel, and as much as he abhorred the idea, it made a lot more sense than *qi*-hungry vampires molding other people's wills like so much clay. It was something he could deal with.

Still, as the evening mellowed, as he finally went to sleep, only to wake up Sunday morning with the same tightness in his stomach, he realized that nothing made sense, nothing was clicking. Anaheim was a freak dream, and Bryce was the disturbed dreamer.

Throughout the day, spent doing Daniel's backyard busywork, his irrational fear of Monday morning increased tenfold. He knew, at the very least, that he was up against a California stereotype, which was evidently shared amongst everyone he'd met so far. Even crotchety old Nathan Brown had given him the cold shoulder after their initial meeting, and it all had something to do with...*something*.

In the evening, he still hadn't come up with an acceptable explanation, nor with a get-popular-quick scheme. He climbed the stairs with a heavy heart as he wished for one small bit of incredible luck: that somehow before morning time would come to a complete stop—thereby sparing him from having to face the big bad world.

* * *

Inevitability prompted gradual acceptance, and Monday morning arrived at the whim of a merciless alarm clock. Bryce rolled out of bed, tried not to become too aware of the fact that he was grooming, brushing, getting dressed for the privilege of making zero-period P.E.—which was no fault on his behalf. He enjoyed athletics, though somewhere between Texas and California the credits system became a mishmash of transferred deficits. Hence zero-period P.E. and, later in the year, summer school and a mailbox diploma.

Daniel had offered to drive him this morning, but he decided to forgo the stifling silence of even a brief car ride and walked the half-mile himself.

The zero-period P.E. coach was not the same instructor he'd had for sixth period P.E. Where Ms. Kerr was a laid-back, go-at-your-own-pace overseer of recreational sports, Coach Stieffel was a battle-scarred, time-worn molder of lanky teenage fodder into sleek, highly-efficient sports machines.

"Black cotton shorts, gray T-shirt," he said upon Bryce's entering the small office at the rear of the boys' locker room. He scrutinized an early edition of *The Register* as he spoke; his rigid muscle structure pressed formidably through his T-shirt. "That's it. You can pick 'em up at the school store or down at Wal-Mart. There are no sit-outs. Forget your P.E. clothes and you'll be participating in your undies. Keep in mind that we're in the pool twice a week. You'll need swim shorts for that."

Bryce wasn't sure if he should say "yes" or "yes, sir," so he said nothing at all and left the office when it became apparent Stieffel had completed his oratory.

There wasn't a single familiar face amongst all those who were in attendance. Most were seniors who'd slacked off during their first three years and who were now paying for it with their mornings. Bryce wore the shorts and T-shirt he'd brought with him, took a spot in line as roll was called.

A twenty-minute warm-up, consisting of various stretches, jumping-jacks, sit-ups, and push-ups, was followed by a series of laps around the inside of the gymnasium. Afterward, Bryce found himself standing with a group of boys near the water fountain.

"What do you think of Stieffel?" one of them asked.

"He's all boot camp," Bryce replied. "Without the buzz cut."

The boy laughed, extended his hand. "I'm Cal."

"Bryce."

"What school are you from?"

"Lee, San Antonio."

Cal snorted. "Geez. You got double-screwed, huh?"

"What?"

"Country bumpkin having to switch schools your senior year. Sucks to be you."

Bryce wasn't sure how to take that. "I'm okay with it."

Cal seemed dissatisfied with this answer. Narrowing his gaze, he exerted a look of such intensity that Bryce was unable to look away. "Hey, check her out."

Bryce turned slightly, felt Cal's hands come to rest on his shoulders, guiding.

He pointed to a short, black-haired girl standing uncertainly at the edge of Stieffel's group. She wore thick-framed glasses, had braces, and kept the top half of her face hidden beneath heavy bangs. She was homely, and yet Bryce suddenly had an unbelievable thing for her.

"That's her," Cal said, gently kneading Bryce's shoulders. His voice was smooth as cream. "She's had her eye on you ever since you came into the gym. Yep. Poor ugly duckling like that, never been kissed, too shy to even *think* of asking a big stud like you to make all her dreams come true. But maybe she doesn't have to. Maybe you're such a nice guy that you'll help her out. Maybe you'll go right on over there and stick your tongue down her throat and show her that even a wallflower can get lucky on the right day."

Bryce blinked, tried to clear his head, which had suddenly become clouded without warning. *Almost like...the weekend...trying to think about something else, but...the girl, beside the swimming pool. Or had she been in the living room with me? Same girl, or someone else?* He started walking, trailing half-coherent thoughts as he went. *Doesn't matter. Probably not important anyway. Why didn't I notice* this *girl before?*

Naturally, she didn't expect it when he touched her shoulder, pulled her somewhat away from the other girls, and forced a deep-tongue kiss on her with clumsy, disjointed passion. Her stifled protest melted away in a moment of shared urgency—

An invisible cord snapped.

—oh, crap.

Bryce started, stumbled a bit, becoming aware of what he was doing as if he'd only been watching from the sidelines until now. He pulled back from the girl, a grotesquely thick, sticky thread of saliva connecting their lips.

Laughter sounded from Cal and the other boys.

"Oh, geez," Bryce stammered, wiping his mouth and letting go of the girl. "Oh, *g-geez*. I'm s-sorry...I'm s-so sorry." He turned around suddenly, rage and embarrassment peeling off of him in waves as he saw Cal giving him the finger.

That jackass! Somehow he made me—

"Powell!" barked Stieffel. "In my office! Now!"

Braces Girl merely smiled and stared dreamily off into space.

* * *

Though he was certain he was going to have his head handed to him, what transpired in Stieffel's office was not what Bryce expected.

"I'm assuming you're not from around here," the coach began, taking his seat.

Bryce swallowed nervously, aware that the warning bell for first period had just sounded. "No, sir. From out of state."

Stieffel nodded. "I'll also wager you're not the class-clown type. You don't usually go around planting kisses on girls you don't know."

"I didn't mean to. It just sort of...happened."

"A lot of things *just sort of happen*, but innocence is no excuse. Whether or not you know what you're doing, my class is still being disrupted in the process, and I won't stand for it. Now, I'm only telling you this because they don't hand out street-smarts pamphlets with the school orientation packets, but there's a certain mindset in Anaheim that tends to make it very hard for those not aware of what's going on to fit in. Guys like Cal, they like throwing their knack around as often as possible, so I'd suggest you learn, and learn quickly, to control your own actions before you wake up one day and find someone else doing it for you."

A knack, Bryce thought, recalling what Nathan Brown had said, what Joshua had hinted at in his own enigmatic way.

"Sir," he said, biting his lip uncertainly. "Is this a joke?"

Stieffel's expression remained as cold and clear as ever.

Bryce stopped smiling. "Sorry, sir," he murmured, averting his gaze, though he could still feel the man's stare as if it were a sizzling tractor beam enveloping his head.

"Raise your right hand," Stieffel commanded.

Before he even became aware of the motion, Bryce found his right arm suspended in the air.

"Make a fist."

His muscles tensed, his fingers closed; Bryce's body performed without his consent.

"That was me," said Stieffel, leaning forward. "Now it's your turn. Unclench your fingers and lower your arm, Mr. Powell."

Bryce attempted to comply, but his arm remained right where it was, muscles straining beneath the skin as he focused all his energy into regaining control. He even tried using his free arm to perform the desired motion, but there were forces at work he couldn't begin to comprehend, much less control. After several moments of silent struggling, he gave up, looked at Stieffel again. He could feel a bead of sweat trickling down his cheek.

"Sir," he began, trembling slightly—at which point Stieffel nodded and let him go. His arm dropped back into his lap like a slab of meat; it took a moment to get back the feeling in his fingers.

Rising from his seat, Stieffel said, "Welcome to Anaheim." He pointed toward the door. "You're dismissed."

Bryce left without saying a word.

Chapter 13

The paranoia Bryce acquired in Coach Stieffel's office stuck with him throughout the day. As such, he steered clear of anyone he knew until after lunch, which he spent alone in a remote corner of the library. So absorbed was he in his own disarray that he completely forgot about the real reason he'd been dreading school in the first place: the Girl with the Boy's Haircut.

She caught his attention in algebra class, when she walked into the room and took her seat just before the tardy bell sounded. Bryce immediately blushed from head to toe and tried to compact himself behind his desk somewhat—as if on this particular day he might have acquired the coveted ability to shape-shift at will. Visions of his late-night liquor store dream flashed through his head, and he felt the blood rushing to all the wrong parts of his body.

I'm going to die, he thought, groaning inwardly.

The Girl paid him no mind for the first few minutes of class (during which time Ms. Featley took roll), but he was still paranoid nonetheless—especially after what had happened in Coach Stieffel's office. Though the calm and collected half of his brain told him that such things were impossible, the more whimsical side was considerably worried that an inexplicably attractive tomboy-exhibitionist girl had somehow violated his dreams.

She looked at him—presumably a passing glance—as she nonchalantly surveyed the classroom and waited for the lesson to begin. Her gaze caught his for a moment, and though it was perhaps not as self-confident as it had been on Friday, it was potent nonetheless. He felt something there, even after her eyes had wandered elsewhere. Like maybe she was still watching him via some metaphysical channel.

He scrutinized her throughout roll call, tried to figure out a way to distinguish girl from midnight specter.

"All right, people," Ms. Featley began, reclaiming her post at the head of the classroom. "Today we will be doing some group work. I'll be dividing you up into pairs. When I call out your names, please move your desks together."

Bryce faced forward, clasped his hands atop his desk and tried to think about baseball.

"Aiken and Pleeth," Ms. Featley began, walking down the aisle with her clipboard in hand. Even before she got to his section, Bryce already knew with whom he was going to be paired. "Delaney and Ramirez...Bentley and Kim...Miller and Powell."

Another rush of blood to the head, another wave of excruciating heat as he

looked across the room at his newly assigned partner. She glanced only briefly at him, apparently disinterested as she rose to rearrange her desk—though he imagined she might be just as enamored as he and was merely more skilled at hiding it. After all, she'd been giving him such flirtatious looks on Friday; if she *had* wanted him, if she *had* decided to invade his dream—

No, he thought. *That's nonsense, paranoia—how could that possibly be? And yet you saw what Stieffel did, you were there when Cal made you kiss that girl. Oh, and Sheryl, in the counseling office, in the cabana, and—look, she's already moved her desk and you're still sitting here like a dork.*

He joined the Girl at the center of the aisle, tried not to stare too much as he scrutinized her, a mental image of Coach Stieffel wavering in the back of his mind. He recognized the scent of her body wash and shampoo immediately. It had been stronger in his dream, for he'd been closer, there hadn't been clothing to dampen the odors. Nevertheless, this was just as potent. A quick, surreptitious look-over (as she turned her head away for a moment) confirmed her lean, utilitarian femininity, semi-evident through her shirt and pants, and more pleasing in real life than in his dreams. He was impressed, enamored—confused, for she *so* wasn't his type at all. He should have been indifferent.

I should be thinking about anything else besides her right now.

He focused his gaze on the desktop, fidgeted as he felt the sweat building in his armpits and between his legs. He wished Ms. Featley would hurry up and hand out the lesson worksheets.

The Girl waited in silence, watching him and ignoring him. He noticed her hands were sturdy, her fingernails trimmed short and unadorned.

Got to be a dyke, he thought, and found himself studying her face. Delicate, creamy white, almost. The face of an angel—

"What's with you?" asked the Girl suddenly, eyes on him.

Bryce, having been caught staring, blinked and sucked in a gulp of air. He now realized he'd been holding his breath. He started to apologize, but instead, miscalculating the amount of pressure needed to work his tongue, merely made a muffled choking sound. After a moment's wrestling with his own tonsils, he managed to get out, "Allergies."

She looked amused. "What?"

He swallowed hard. "Allergies," he repeated, though in his whole life he'd never so much as looked up the definition of "histamine." "They, er, sometimes act up."

"Oh." An indifferent shrug. "That sucks."

"Yeah."

A moment of silence passed between them. Bryce found he couldn't look away, even when she did. While all around him other students were chatting quietly about this and that, he found himself floating between two worlds, as if he and the Girl were separated from reality by a thin, invisible membrane. He studied the sleek line of her jaw, the slight movement as she nibbled her lower lip, reminding him of his dream, when those same lips had—

"Kyna," said Ms. Featley, who'd now come to stand beside Bryce's desk. He

coughed slightly, sat up straight as she handed him a worksheet. "You can get Bryce up to speed on the chapter, can't you?"

"Sure," replied the Girl, combining her nonchalant shrug and polite smile into one suave movement.

"Excellent." Ms. Featley patted Bryce's shoulder. "If you have any questions, come up to my desk."

"Yes, ma'am." He placed his worksheet in front of him and pretended to read the instructions at the top while he continued to sneak clandestine glances at his partner. *Kyna. So that's her name. Kyna Miller.* "So..." he began.

"So."

"Where do you want to start?"

"Um...how about...where are you from?"

He laughed. "No, I meant the homework."

Kyna snickered. "I know."

"Oh."

Bryce felt himself blush, a reaction which only seemed to feed Kyna's confidence. She leaned back slightly in her seat, her smile broadening. Calm and collected. Almost cocky, but timid as well. *Trying to be friendly to someone she doesn't know, someone new. Or maybe she just doesn't make friends very often with guys. Not her thing. Maybe I'm just boring her when she could be spending the rest of the class thinking of her hot cheerleader girlfriend.*

At the very least, though, he decided she wasn't a mind reader, and certainly not a nighttime succubus. She was too ordinary, too much of a fragile girl wrapped in a street punk's skin. Minus the minimalism, she was very pretty, and she was watching him now, waiting for his answer.

"San Antonio," he said, relaxing just a little.

She started writing something on her worksheet. "I figured. Never saw you before Friday. Kind of a funny time to move out of state."

"Yeah," said Bryce, nodding. "My dad's not very good in that respect."

They worked in silence for a while. Then, quite abruptly, Kyna said:

"Must've been hard on your girlfriend."

"I don't know about that," Bryce said, shrugging. "We broke up just before I left. We'd kind of been dragging things out. I mean, we'd been seeing each other for almost a year and we'd never slept together..." He trailed off, realizing he'd just blurted out a bit of personal information he'd much rather have kept private.

Kyna looked away, pursing her lips and apparently fighting back a giggle. "*Okay*, Bryce."

He coughed, smiled uncomfortably. "Geez, I don't know why I said that."

"Guess you're just the open, honest type."

Not that honest. God, my skin is constricting, I feel like I'm going to explode. "So... how about you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"None of your business."

Bryce bit his lip. It was infuriating; he was trying to get to know someone he already knew. Sort of.

Kyna didn't pursue any further conversation (though she continued to sneak quick glances at Bryce every so often, when she thought he wasn't looking), so he took the hint and focused on the assignment for the remainder of the hour.

When it came time for everyone to move their desks back and turn in their worksheets, he found himself and his partner were the only two who remained sitting while everyone else milled about near the classroom entrance as they waited for the bell to ring. This seclusion prompted Kyna to fidget somewhat; it seemed she didn't have anywhere else to look—so she looked at him, smiled, looked away, looked back at him again until at last he rose from his desk, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and walked over to her. The whole time his heart was racing madly, as if this was their last class together *ever*, as if, when the bell rang, she might walk out of his life before he got a chance to figure out why in the world he wanted to get to know her in the first place.

Having spontaneously lost seventeen years of accumulated social skills, he said, "Algebra sucks, huh?"

Kyna (whose plain expression made it difficult to discern whether or not she appreciated his presence) sighed, rose from her desk, donned her backpack, and said, "Sometimes I like to draw." She faced away from him, apparently watching the clock on the wall, and perhaps regretting the fact that her response hadn't been any better than his algebra comment.

However, it was at this moment that a sort of pressure was relieved, and Bryce's head cleared enough for him to realize that for the majority of the class he hadn't entirely been himself. He blinked, shook his head slightly, as if coming awake from a trance. *Just like P.E. all over, like at the pool with Sheryl...like in my dream.* He looked at Kyna, whose attention was still on the clock. *Has she been...influencing me? This whole time, without me knowing?* But no, she didn't seem like that at all. She wasn't brash or overbearing, like Cal; nor was she cunning, like Sheryl. And she bore absolutely no resemblance to Coach Stieffel. Still, if this sort of thing was really going on, if people had some sort of knack, maybe someone experienced at the game could get her way by playing innocent until at last her victim exhausted his usefulness—

He clutched his head, moaning softly as he was hit by a mental wind of ridiculous possibilities.

Kyna took notice and faced him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

They were still standing far enough away from the core group of students that he was able to speak in subtle tones without fear of being overheard. "*Ugh*. It's nothing. Just..."

"What?" Kyna repeated, stepping a little closer.

Bryce grimaced, spread his hands and rolled his eyes. "Ever since I got here—and I know this is going to sound dorky—I've had this feeling that everyone in Anaheim is playing some kind of joke on me."

"Oh?"

"I mean, not *everyone*, but, well, I was in P.E. this morning and this guy, uh, he made me do something I didn't want to do. Like mind-control or something. And he's not the only one. Other people have done the same thing." *For example, this really cute girl almost made me bang her at my parents' friends' pool party. You did it to me, too, in a dream.* "It's like the whole neighborhood is, well, I don't know. It's crazy. Never mind. Forget I said it."

Kyna smiled. She was rubbing one of her backpack straps with her thumb. "Anybody can take a few classes in hypnosis. You probably just met the wrong people at the wrong time. Anaheim's like any city: it takes all kinds."

"Everyone keeps mentioning they have this...knack."

"And you think because you're the new kid they're all somehow ganging up on you?"

Bryce squirmed. She'd hit the nail on the head—but hearing his conclusion summarized so succinctly only made him feel more constricted.

Thankfully, before he could answer, the bell rang, and everyone began filing out of the room. Bryce took up the rear, following Kyna out into the hallway, where she waved goodbye and started to her next class.

"Nice talking to you," Bryce said, waving back.

She started to turn away, but then stopped, faced him again, and smiled. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. "I'm seeing somebody."

Bryce blinked, not comprehending.

"You asked before if I had a boyfriend."

"Oh, yeah."

He blushed as she turned away, started walking down the hallway.

* * *

Kyna repeated a collection of swear words in her head as she left Bryce in the hallway, made her way hastily through the flow of students and toward the ladies' room. Along the way, she happened to spot Joshua—looking like an animal on the run, as usual—approaching from the opposite direction. She felt him tremble mentally when he saw her, and he navigated toward the edge of the corridor.

She intercepted him immediately, fists clenched, teeth grinding in her mouth. He stopped, stumbled slightly, looked at her with an expression of fear and surprise.

Kee, what's the matter? she heard him think.

With a muffled swear, she raised her fist, swung across Joshua's chest—not actually hitting him, but coming close enough to make him flinch—and slammed her knuckles into the locker beside him. The noise filled the hallway and, for a moment, caught the attention of those within close range. Some stared, others pointed, but no one stopped to investigate any further. In a moment the incident was long ago and far away.

She left Joshua trembling and gawking like a dullard and continued on down the hall, to the restroom, where she locked herself inside a stall. It was here that she

let everything go—just for a moment. An instant, a brief period of time during which she relaxed her hold on everything she'd been moderating in her life. Beneath the fabric of her shirt and jacket, she felt her skin writhe, memories of nearly-forgotten scars resurfacing, manifesting themselves physically as the body of a young girl used and abused. When she looked down at herself, she saw that familiar body—grown up now, seventeen years old now, still lean and strong, but showing more wear and tear than anyone should ever see in their teens.

Bungling everything, she thought, recalling her work on Bryce in algebra class. *A lack of effort is more like it. Just as tongue-twisted as he'd been. Supposed to be better than that, stronger. How many times have I had this discussion with myself?*

She was supposed to have played it cool, work his essence slowly and gradually, prepare him in a gentle, unnoticeable fashion so that by the time he was completely hers he wouldn't have noticed a thing. Nor would he have cared. Instead, she'd become instantly infatuated with him, his essence, his personality, that gorgeous body—

—stop it.

She inhaled deeply, clamped down with her control once more and brought her daydream to an end. *Think of Josh, sitting in a bathroom stall and pathetically digesting himself a little more each day. Do you want turn out like him? Of course not. There's a reason he's stuck in your head—so you know what* not *to do. No, a little at a time is how you do it. One sip at a time. Strictly objective. Be patient until his blood is changed, until he comes around.*

The only problem was, in order to do that, she needed to be close to Bryce, to learn more about him, how his mind worked, how his *qi* flowed, and if she was going to melt like so much butter every time she went near him...

But, then, maybe I don't have to do it that way. Maybe...maybe sorry ol' Joshua hasn't completely outlived his usefulness.

The warning bell sounded, echoing throughout the empty restroom. Suffused by a new sort of serenity, Kyna exited the stall and headed for her next class.

* * *

Oblivious to the emotional battle being waged by Kyna in the girls' restroom, Bryce opened his locker and stuffed his backpack inside. It was at that very moment that Joshua, seemingly conjured from out of thin air, decided to make an unexpected appearance.

"Hey," he greeted with a feeble wave.

Bryce closed his locker and eyed Joshua suspiciously. "Hey."

"You got a minute?"

"Well, actually—"

"I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I was a little, um, out of it."

"Oh, yeah. That's okay." Bryce paused, suppressing the urge to ask for the truth —it would make him seem too naïve, and his curiosity would be too much of an excuse for Joshua to latch onto him. "Look, I have to get to my next class."

"Can we talk some more after school, then? We can meet out in front, by the flag pole. Just give me a few minutes, that's all."

"I start work after school. I can't. I'm sorry." Bryce forced himself to turn away, but Joshua grabbed his arm. The boy's expression had become ashen.

"I saw you talking to Kyna," he said. "She's reeling you in, and you don't even know it. She was the one in your dream, I bet. She's probably already tapped you, hasn't she?"

Bryce wrenched himself from Joshua's grip and pushed him back. Hard. So hard, in fact, that Joshua stumbled and fell onto the floor in the middle of the hallway.

Never mind the truth—not from him.

He said, "Josh, you're nuts! That's what you said about Ash, but you know what? I think you're just as bad as everyone else. You're not here to help me, you're just making an even bigger mess of things. So leave me alone, got it?" He left, then, exited the main building and headed for the gymnasium.

He spent P.E. class shooting hoops. When the end-of-day bell rang, he showered and changed, headed back into the main building for his backpack. By the time he reached his locker, the hallway was virtually deserted. He entered his locker combination, opened the door, paused when he noticed a white piece of note paper resting on the uppermost shelf. Curious, he took the paper in his hands, unfolded it. It was a sketch—a really good one—of Kyna and himself naked and embracing.

It was a third-person view of Friday night's dirty dream.

He swallowed, suddenly chilled. He looked up and down the hall, back at the sketch. At the bottom of the page a brief message had been scrawled: SEE YOU TONIGHT.

Josh, he thought immediately. *Somehow he knows. Somehow he was inside my head that night, with Kyna—or else it was all him, messing with my dreams because he's a jerk or just plain crazy.*

Bryce grabbed his backpack, closed his locker, crumpled up the sketch and stuffed it into his pocket. Part of him actually considered seeking out Joshua, demanding answers, though the fact of the matter was he didn't know if what Joshua had in mind would help clarify anything either way.

He started down the hall, stopping and looking vigilantly over his shoulder several times, thinking he heard muffled voices from somewhere nearby, but convincing himself it was only his imagination.

* * *

Joshua laughed inwardly when three o'clock rolled around and the last class of the day ended.

No appearances by Heather or the police, no principal calling me into his office, not even the slightest day-after story told by acquaintances, wondering where Heather is, wondering if it's true, has she really been raped?

Smiling to himself, he entered the main building with the satisfaction of knowing he'd made it safely through the school day (or rather, through *most* of the school day, as he'd purposely avoided Mr. Brandt's class for obvious reasons) unscathed and unnoticed. Practice made perfect, and he'd been practicing the art of invisibility for a very long time. It was by no means a physical thing, but rather a non-obvious way of carrying himself, his presence.

He walked slowly down the empty hall, so immersed in his own thoughts that he didn't notice Kyna's trio standing beside his locker until it was too late.

"Hello, Joshua," said Kyna, stepping toward him and smiling in her self-assured, unnerving way. Anthony and Natalie quickly moved behind him, able to intercept, should he try to run.

He lowered his gaze. "Hello, Kyna."

"Let's talk."

She linked her arm with his, led him to the end of the hallway, where the maintenance cubby was. There was a private spot, occupied only by an empty water bucket and a mop, underneath the staircase. Once out of sight, Kyna pushed him against the wall and leaned in close, her arms closing him in, her knee pressed delicately into his groin. She snatched up his gaze and pulled at his essence, as if he were a dog on a leash and she his master.

"W-what do you w-want?" he croaked.

"It's been so long since we last talked."

"N-no duh."

"I thought we could help each other out."

"Yeah?"

"I want you to tap Bryce for me."

Joshua swallowed, tried to look away, but found he was paralyzed. Kyna had such a strong grip on his soul that he feared his very existence might rip in half if he budged an inch.

"Come on," she continued, bringing her face close to his. Her breath filled his nostrils. "I know you're hungry. *Famished*. That's why you want to be friends with Bryce, right? Best buddy, blood buddy—devour every last drop of him until you're so full you'll never have to eat again for months, maybe even *years*." With one hand she began kneading the back of his neck, with the other she interlaced her fingers with his. Then she leaned in and kissed him.

God...I've been wanting to do this for so long. Been forever since we had each other. Oh, Kee...

"I remember, too," Kyna whispered, ending the kiss. "Being with each other, sharing everything."

Joshua found he was nearly panting, licking his lips for any traces of her saliva, any droplet of her essence.

Her grip on his neck intensified as she leaned even closer against him. "We can do it again. We can share with each other. You can tap Bryce for me. You'll share his essence with me, and I'll share with you."

She leaned in once more, tried to kiss him again, but he suddenly squirmed

within her grasp. He raised his hand, palmed her face away in a last-ditch effort. "No."

"No," Kyna echoed, her smile vanishing instantly.

Joshua rose to his full height. "No. He's none of your business. Get lost." Surprised at the forcefulness of his own voice, he tried to step forward, but Kyna wouldn't budge. Likewise, her companions remained on either side of him, blocking all avenues of escape.

Kyna's thoughts rang out in his mind; her expression was no longer affectionate. *Do you know how hard this is? Do you know how hard it is for me to be this close to you? I make you an offer and you act like you're too good for me? If we don't eat, we starve, Joshua. You want it—bad. You want me almost as badly as you want Bryce. You wish so much you could sink your teeth into me right here and do anything you've ever wanted with me. It's all you've ever wanted.*

Joshua found himself nodding. "Yes, oh, God, Kyna...please. I'm so sorry. Yes." He was whimpering, an emaciated victim, a starving slave.

"You'll do anything I say?"

A gasp, a nod in response.

"Good, because if you stray even the slightest bit..." She sent him a mental image, a scene perfectly superimposed over reality except that in this pseudo-instance Kyna was suddenly pressing a knife to his crotch—

Joshua jerked in her grasp, grunted ferally. "No...no, I'll follow. Please... anything you want...I'll do it."

The smile finally returned to Kyna's face. She banished the pain and kissed him again. Deep. Hard. Biting. Eliciting blood.

He stifled a painful yelp, suddenly becoming himself again, blinking in the indirect light and cursing out loud as Kyna at last let go of him and shamelessly wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"Go home," she instructed, "and stay in your room. Wait for me to come get you. Don't leave for *any* reason."

She turned away and left him there, sweaty and exhausted, leaning hunched against the wall as he felt the buzz in his veins—Kyna's revitalized influence over him. Slowly, carefully, he used his shirtsleeve to dab at his bloodied mouth and chin. Then he quietly made his way back out into the hallway, taking his steps one at a time as he navigated toward the exit.

He cried angry tears all the way.

Chapter 14

"Keeping busy means keeping out of trouble."

Such had been a handy saying of Daniel's throughout much of Bryce's childhood. If ever he'd misbehaved in any way, he'd quickly been assigned a small list of unimaginative chores designed to keep him occupied until bedtime. Now, the strategy was more or less the same, albeit without the typical parent-child lecture. It was merely decided that he was old enough to start earning his keep, and so that's what he did on Monday afternoon, after school.

He sat on the curb at the edge of his parents' driveway and waited for his ride. The sweat was beginning to bead on his forehead when a beat-up old Volkswagen turned into the cul-de-sac and came to a shuddering halt in front of him.

Behind the wheel was a red-headed, acne-prone twenty-something whose ebony-framed glasses were thick enough to serve as flying goggles. Flicking out the remains of a wilted cigarette, he stuck his head out the window and said, "Hey, are you Daniel's kid?"

Bryce nodded, getting up. "Bryce. Yeah."

"Cool. I'm Jack. Get in. You're riding with me."

Bryce climbed into the passenger seat and shook hands with Jack as he fumbled with the seat belt. They pulled out onto Lincoln and, between the more relevant parts of a Sevendust album, which blasted unscrupulously from a ratty portable CD player hookup, exchanged random bits of commentary throughout the ride:

"It's a home and garden outlet."

"Huh?"

"The warehouse job. Grunt work, mostly. Hope you don't mind lifting and moving."

Bryce shrugged. "Oh. Naw."

"So, you're from Texas, I hear?"

"Yeah."

"How's the Triple-P out there?"

"The what?"

"The Triple-P: pinball, pizza, poontang."

"Um...not bad, I guess." Bryce laughed, though on the inside he was cringing as he added Jack to the growing list in the back of his mind. It seemed there weren't any average people in Anaheim; you were either blunt and outspoken—or you were Joshua. That, and an unprecedented number of people seemed obsessed with sex talk, as if being seventeen years old warranted an automatic invitation to discuss all those things your acquaintances just *knew* were bouncing around inside your

stereotypically horny adolescent brain.

"'Not bad,'" Jack repeated, grinning deviously as he interpreted the convex visuals being filtered through his goggles. "That's one of the benefits of living around here: the people aren't much on socialism or intelligence, and the pizza sucks ass, but God almighty, the trim is the best in the world. You mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

"Cool." Jack lit up. Held out the half-empty carton. "You smoke?"

"No."

"All right, then. So, how'd you get hassled into working for ol' Eddie?"

Bryce shrugged. "My parents are sort of friends of a friend. We met at a barbecue and he offered me a job. It was an easy way to 'keep me out of trouble,' I guess."

"Hell," Jack scoffed. "Bet you can't wait to move out, huh? What are you, twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Seventeen."

"Yeah, you look older than that, but your parents only see the kid inside. They still treat you like you're ten."

"Sometimes."

"I was the exact opposite. Double screwed there. My parents treated me like you'd expect, wouldn't let me go to parties with my friends until I was almost old enough to move out. Girls...well, they pretty much gave me the cold shoulder all through high school." He faced Bryce and winked. "But I learned how to use my tongue in college."

Nice, thought Bryce, facing out the window so as to hide what had turned into a nuclear blush. *Turning the conversation right back around to sex like that. How original.*

Jack seemed to sense his sudden discomfort and snorted. "Oh, come on. Don't go all Kindergarten on me. I bet a big guy like you has no trouble getting action, right?"

His blush intensified as an expectant hush filled the car. When Jack didn't say anything, he shot him a look as if to say, "Are you asking for details?"

Chuckling, Jack focused on the road once again. "Jesus, man. Was just shootin' the breeze."

"No, it's okay," Bryce said, forcing a smile. "I'm just...well, you know. The whole 'a gentleman never tells' kind of thing."

"I gotcha."

They talked about sports for the rest of the drive.

* * *

"Jack will show you the ropes," Edward said, splitting his attention somewhat unevenly between having a conversation with Bryce and taking a call on his cell phone. He walked with his arm around the boy's shoulders during the entire

warehouse tour.

Like I'm his son or something, thought Bryce. *Or else he's just letting me know he's doing me—and Dad, in turn—a favor by letting me work here.*

Edward continued: "You'll clock out at nine-thirty. I'll arrange it so that someone can give you a ride home. Most likely Jack or myself. Come into my office on Fridays to collect your pay."

With that he left Bryce to catch the rhythm of things on his own.

"He's not much on speeches," Jack chuckled, "but the basic rule around here is, if it can be stacked, stack it."

The rest of the afternoon and early evening had Bryce hauling, stacking, pulling and pushing various items ranging from ceramic planters to forty-pound bags of lawn fertilizer. There weren't many other grunts around, so for the most part it was Jack and himself, working in silent coordination. The most intellectually stimulating aspect of the job was learning to use the inventory gun.

Quitting time didn't come soon enough. When it did, Bryce was sweaty, tired, and more than ready to call it an evening.

Since Jack apparently had a "hot date" that he didn't want to be late for, Edward accepted the duty of chauffeuring Bryce home. Along the way they stopped in at a Circle K for a pair of Cokes, which held the two of them over for the remainder of the drive—and which reminded Bryce of that age-old truth: drinks were refreshing, and served as good excuses for not having to talk to one's companion.

For Bryce, it was about halfway through his soda that he realized he was being uncommonly detached. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was an invisible wall of sorts between himself and Edward, a reason he knew he would never get to know the man properly. Oh, they spoke to each other, talked about this and that, but only in the form of brief, meaningless remarks made between long sips.

The Powells' driveway was vacant when they pulled up, which meant Daniel wasn't off work yet.

"Thanks for the ride," Bryce said, unbuckling his seat belt and moving to exit the vehicle.

Edward cleared his throat—a deep, guttural noise that made him pause. He faced the man and saw that he was smiling strangely. "No problem. Let me walk you in."

A warmth came over him; the hairs on the back of his neck went straight. Somewhere deep down inside his gut something tightened—but he wasn't directly aware of any of it as he shrugged and nodded. "Okay, thanks."

Julia must have heard them come up; she opened the front door and stood on the stoop as they crossed the driveway, Edward with his arm once again around Bryce's shoulders.

"There's my worker bee," Julia said, folding her arms and smiling affectionately. "I hope he wasn't too much of a handful?"

"Not at all," replied Edward. He shifted slightly, and Bryce felt him ruffling his hair, roughly massaging his shoulders. "The kid's a good, diligent worker. Only

wish the rest of the guys were as useful."

Julia chuckled.

Edward released Bryce, and he stepped aside a bit, his head suddenly clearing, his mind emerging from an unobserved reverie. He blinked, watched as Julia, gazing and smiling at Edward, seemed to completely disregard his presence—and there was an overwhelming feeling that suddenly both adults wanted to be alone. Or rather, it seemed that *Edward* wanted to be left alone—

—with my mom.

"Dinner's on the table," Julia said, offhandedly motioning for Bryce to go into the house. "Drinks in the fridge."

He blinked, bit his lip as the moment seemed to fold in on itself. He looked back and forth between his mother and Edward, found he was being ignored on both fronts.

"Mom?"

"Start without me. I'll be in soon. Just going to see Edward out."

"Um...okay." A pause. The blood rushed in Bryce's ears, accompanied by a sort of buzzing at the back of his head. He left the adults alone together and entered the house, crossed the living room. In the kitchen he found chicken sandwiches and potato salad spread out on the table. He took one of the sandwiches, breaking off small pieces with his fingers and placing them into his mouth—but he wasn't actually *eating*. His attention was acutely focused on what was happening out on the front step. From where he stood, he could see across the living room and through the door frame at the other end. Edward and his mother were now holding hands, talking in hushed tones, probably thinking he couldn't overhear what was being said—but he could.

"Is Daniel working late tonight?"

"Yes. Still some settling in to do with the new computer systems, I think."

"Ah. Been there. Could take weeks before the left hand knows what the right is doing. Listen, if you ever need anything...I know it's hard having to run the homestead when he's not here. If you ever just want to go out sometime, maybe to dinner, or on a scenic drive along the beach, just let me know. You haven't seen a real sunset until you've seen it out over the Pacific at dusk."

Bryce swallowed a piece of bread, watched incredulously as Edward hit on his mother, bewitched her with an unseen ether more powerful than any love potion —and now he was smiling, leaning in close, head tilted slightly so their lips could meet—

"Mom," Bryce said suddenly, clearing his throat and taking an uneven step forward. Part of his sandwich fell onto the floor, discarded, forgotten—a minor detail left to an alternate reality thwarted by his intervention.

Mom.

Julia blinked, slowly turned and faced him, her expression confused, as if she were coming awake from a light sleep.

Behind her Edward was scowling. *Get lost, kid. This isn't a threesome.*

Bryce swallowed hard, his blood turning cold. He'd heard Edward's voice inside

his head the same as if he'd heard it through a pair of earbuds. Clearer, even. Deeper. More inside his head than his own thoughts.

Regardless, he took another handful of steps forward into the living room because he didn't know what else to do. He certainly couldn't stand idly by and let his mother be taken in by this sweet-talking snake in the grass.

"Um...Mom? Where's the iced tea mix?" he continued, his gaze remaining locked with Edward's in what was rapidly becoming a subconscious battle of wills —while all along Julia remained in limbo somewhere between infinity and sobriety. "Mom?"

For a moment it looked like Edward might leap out of his skin, become a bloodthirsty demon bent on ripping him to shreds with razor-sharp teeth—but then he suddenly smiled, stepped back a bit from the door frame. "Well. I should get going. You two have a good evening, okay?" He turned away, receded into the night.

Julia blinked, apparently herself again. Bryce remained right where he was, muscles tensed, ears straining figuratively like a faithful dog who wasn't satisfied until the intruding presence was out of sight and out of mind. Only when the sound of Edward's car had faded out of earshot did he allow himself to relax.

Holy crap, he thought. *Josh—twisted, messed up Josh—wasn't lying. Duds and initiates...Mom and Edward.*

"You okay, Mom?" he asked after a while.

Stepping into the hallway and closing the door, Julia flashed a smile and brushed back a stray lock of hair from her forehead. "Of course, honey."

"But Edward, he—"

"He was just saying goodnight."

"But he...he was..."

"What?" She came up to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "What is it, honey?"

Bryce suppressed a frustrated outburst and bit his lip. "Nothing." *You're just totally spacing out on me.* He wanted to grab her by the shoulders, rustle her and say, "Can't you see what just happened? He was *hitting* on you! How could you not see that?"

She shrugged and let him go, walked back into the kitchen. He followed her, scrutinizing the back of her head as she poured herself some water from a pitcher in the fridge. He sat at the table and watched her as if he were a young toddler mentally recording his mother's kitchen routine for the first time.

Was I like this when Cal was working me over? he wondered.

After a moment, Julia sat down across from him and, between semi-casual sips from her glass, began picking at a small bowl of grapes resting beside the salad. "Have you made any friends at school yet?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, a couple," he replied.

"That's good."

"My P.E. coach is on crack."

"Oh?"

"Real hardcore. Makes us swim in our underwear."

"Come now. He does not."

"I'll let you know in a week if it's true or not. How's the job hunt?"

Julia's hand twitched ever so slightly as she popped a grape into her mouth. "I'll probably do the secretary thing for a while. At least until I can find something at one of the universities. Or maybe at a junior college."

Bryce nodded. The smell of his own sweat (accumulated throughout the day) was beginning to overpower his deodorant. He rose from the table and headed for the bathroom. At the foot of the staircase he stopped, turned halfway around, and said, "You should, um, be careful around guys like Edward."

Julia remained sitting at the table. "Oh? Why's that?"

He shrugged, started up the stairs. "I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess. Goodnight."

Chapter 15

A cool breeze brushed Bryce's cheek as a loved one might, and he came awake.

"What?" he mumbled, sitting upright and rubbing his eyes. At first he thought it was his mother, but it very quickly became obvious that it was someone else—Kyna, in fact.

She stood near the open bedroom window, arms relaxed at her sides, feet planted firmly on the floor, the toes of one foot curled and tapping the laminate. It was almost as if she was nervous—

"Kyna?" he mumbled, sitting up straighter, trying to get a hold of the scene before he missed any critical details.

She didn't answer. Instead, she stepped forward and climbed onto the bed, pulled back the blanket.

He flinched and tried to move away. "Kyna, this isn't a dream." He'd been sleeping in his boxers; somehow she removed them without him realizing. "I know it's not a dream. I know you're real. Kyna..."

She remained wordless, a governing force in his fantasy seduction, though he sensed she was perhaps not as self-assured as their first time together. Her hands quivered ever so slightly, her kisses were distant, her movements were almost mechanical, her eyes focusing more on the various aspects of his bed rather than the intimate details of his face. When they finished, she settled beside him, breathless, wordless, little more than a ghost in his arms.

The dream played on like a reel of film continuing long past the end of the movie. Certain frames seemed to skip and jump.

Bryce kissed the top of Kyna's head. "Did I just get laid again?" he asked.

She shifted away from him without answering, got out of bed. He watched her as she moved around the room. She was looking for something, going through his things. She opened the door to the closet, stretched to reach the top shelf, then turned around. She was holding something: his old pocketknife—an item he'd acquired from a friend in the sixth grade. He'd never used it for anything more than self-pride, but here came Kyna, crawling onto the bed again, kneeling beside him, holding her arm out over his head, the edge of the blade poised against the smooth, pale skin of her wrist.

"Open your mouth," she said softly, her first words of the evening.

He tensed. Surely she didn't mean—

"Open your mouth, Bryce. *Now*."

He shuddered. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled. He tried to protest verbally, but his jaw wasn't working right, his vocal cords were all knotted. Too

much air was escaping his lips before he could form the right words. He could only scream inside his head as he felt Kyna's essence take over his muscles. He felt his head tilting back, his mouth opening; he watched in revulsion as, with pouting lips, she slashed her wrist in one quick movement. A stream of blood, warm and coppery, trickled down into his mouth, the droplets rolling over his tongue, down his throat.

"Drink, Bryce," she told him. "I know you've probably already felt the hunger, and you didn't know why. The fever's only the first part. I'm...I'm sorry it has to be this way, but you have to swallow. You need to drink. It's okay. Swallow."

She was crying now, her tears trickling hot down her cheek. He didn't understand why, if it made her so sad, she was doing what she was doing, but he obliged anyway, stopped trying to resist. When he'd had enough, presumably by Kyna's calculations, she lowered her arm and leaned in close so she could kiss him on the mouth once more—

—he jolted upright in bed, arms and legs spasming as if his soul had suddenly been catapulted back into his slumbering body without warning. He was, however, fully aware and able to ascertain the state of his room. Naturally, he was alone; Kyna's visit had indeed been a dream—and yet it had been so much more.

He got out of bed, went to the window, which was open a crack (as he'd left it). He slid it open all the way and peered out into the darkened driveway, which was still and motionless. Once again he was reminded that, due to the sheer drop beneath his window, there was no way Kyna could have climbed in.

He closed the window and stood beside his bed. He studied the rumpled sheets. There were no blood stains, nor could he taste any sort of metallic residue in his mouth.

Kyna had come and gone without a trace.

For nearly an hour, Bryce puttered and pondered the pros and cons of going back to sleep versus attempting to stay awake the entire night so as to dissuade any additional tomboy-succubi from having their way with him while he slept. Eventually it came down to his standing beside his bed and shifting from foot to foot as he bit his fingernails in anguish. *To be afraid of going to sleep. This is messed up. Maybe at school they can screw with me, but not here. This is my home, damn it.*

The alarm clock read three fifteen.

Somehow, just before dawn, he managed to coax himself between the sheets, which he pulled up to his chin as he stared unblinking at the ceiling.

He could hear his parents snoring peacefully in the other room.

Chapter 16

Tuesday afternoon: Kyna walked into class ten minutes early and wordlessly settled herself in her seat. Ms. Featley, sitting at her own desk and grading a stack of papers, regarded her only briefly before returning to her work.

That's right, thought Kyna. *It's only Quiet Kyna. Just ignore me like you do every other societal blemish.*

On any other day she might have found amusement in throwing her knack a bit, maybe making the teacher drop her pen repeatedly, or making her incapable of effectively holding a fork (and thereby rendering the remainder of her lunch inaccessible). However, today was different. It was one of those days where she just wasn't herself despite the fact that she'd fed last night—God, had she fed!—and awakened in the morning feeling more than satisfied. *Too* satisfied, perhaps.

A part of her had already decided early on that she'd blundered throughout the proceedings, allowed too much of herself free reign in the dream. That had led to a mental argument that had stayed with her all through the day. Now, in an attempt to keep herself from exploding in frustration, she occupied as much of her mind as possible so that her thoughts wouldn't wander back to memories of Bryce's bedroom.

Don't need to go nuts in public, have everyone looking at me and asking dumb questions.

She pulled out her sketchbook, found an empty page and began sketching out an imaginary scene in which Bryce was reclining nude against a spread of velvet cushioning.

Look at yourself, she thought as she shaded in his eyes. *Obsessing over a guy. And don't try to justify it by saying you're just getting to know him so you can tap him more effectively. You're hot for him. You know you are.*

Eventually the warning bell rang, and one by one students began filing into the classroom. Their chattering and giggling was auxiliary to her drawing; so engrossed was she in her creation that she didn't even hear Ms. Featley beginning roll call.

Why shouldn't I get something out of it? I'm a victim like everyone else, trying to make do with what I've got. Why does a painter paint? Because she wants to set a moment in time. Why shouldn't I be able to do that? Just the slightest bit of pleasure in surviving. Besides, what does it mean to like a boy? Hormonal response. Like all that stuff we learned in sex-ed class. Our bodies making sure we want to keep having babies so the human race doesn't fizzle out and die. Or in this case, it's whatever's coursing through my veins that wants to make sure I don't let it *die—*

"Does he know you draw naked pictures of him?"

Kyna twitched, found that she was being observed by the girl sitting behind her. She turned slightly and scowled. "What the hell?"

The girl (whose name she'd never cared to learn) receded somewhat, exchanged glances between the sketchpad and Bryce, who'd recently taken his seat across the way. "Geez. I was just asking."

"Well, don't," said Kyna, gazing full force at the girl, pushing everything else out of her train of sight. "Just mind your own damn business and forget all about this, okay?"

"Oh," breathed the girl, blinking, disconcerted. "I just thought I saw...saw... hmm." She giggled stupidly. "You know, I can't remember what I was talking about! How silly of me." She leaned away, returned her attention to whatever it was she'd been doing before butting in.

Kyna faced forward again, tried in vain to enjoy the simple satisfaction of throwing her knack. She replaced her sketchpad in her backpack and glanced across the room. Bryce was seated at his desk, and she was surprised to see that he was apparently scrutinizing her, though she couldn't be certain whether or not it had anything to do with last night's dream.

Probably has everything to do with the dream, she thought, taking notice of the slight puffiness under his eyes. No doubt he'd awakened afterward and spent the rest of the night inspecting every inch of his bedroom in an attempt to find evidence of her visit. *Twisted, the way guys are always begging for sex, but when something like this happens, they don't want anything to do with it. And now he's looking at me and trying to think of a way to let me know that he knows.* She smiled, unable to help herself. *Cute—no, pathetic. Forget him and his pretty-boy facade. Just play with him. Try and get some enjoyment out of it.*

* * *

Bryce pressed his knuckles against his chin and wished dearly that time didn't have to go so horrendously *slow*. All day long he'd been debating what method would be most effective in confronting Kyna, but here he was sitting in class with her and feeling about as confrontational as a jar of pickled eggs. Indeed, the more he stared at her, the more her placid demeanor served to captivate and confuse him. Not to mention her frequent, playful glances in his direction—like she *knew* he knew. It was physically constricting.

Smiling at me with that sly look on her face, he thought. *She knows. She* has *to know, or else I'm completely nuts and this is just another waking dream where she's going to whip out the goods in front of the whole class and ask me to slam her one against the chalkboard. But no, what am I talking about? Walk up to her before roll call, look her square in the face, and tell her I know what's going on. Ah, too late. Ms. Featley's already finished, she's already begun the lesson and I haven't been paying attention because I'm a paranoid dork and—*

"Mr. Powell," said Ms. Featley, her voice suddenly becoming amplified—as if he'd just emerged from a pool full of water. She stood in front of the chalkboard

with her hands folded; her expression indicated that she'd made previous attempts at capturing his attention.

He straightened in his seat, clearing his throat. Somewhere behind him a male student snickered.

"I'm sorry to interrupt whatever daydream you were having," continued the teacher, "but we *do* have work today."

"I'm listening," he responded, though his tone wasn't very convincing.

"Good. Then you should have no problem completing this equation for me."

Soft laughter flitted throughout the classroom as Ms. Featley held out a piece of chalk and gestured for Bryce to go up to the board. Sighing, he rose from his seat and went to the front of the room. He took the chalk in his hands as she stepped out of the way and began to busy herself at her desk. He gazed for a moment at the equation, then began filling in the missing parts. He stopped suddenly when he heard giggling behind him and realized, with a stifled gasp, that he'd drawn two zeros with dots in their centers—breasts.

Immediately, before the teacher could see, he erased the bits of anatomy and replaced them with two proper zeros. Surprised at himself, he nevertheless moved on to the next part of the problem, wanting to get through with it. He tried to write an eight, but instead his hand moved of its own accord. When he realized he was drawing a crude hand gesture, he quickly erased it with his fingers and dropped the chalk.

Ms. Featley, now hearing more laughter inspired by his blundering, looked up from her desk and frowned. "Is something the matter, Mr. Powell?"

Rather than risk losing control again, he swallowed and shrugged his shoulders. "I-I don't know how to finish the equation, ma'am." Nervously, he squatted, picked up the chalk he'd dropped, and replaced it in its holder before returning to his desk.

Ms. Featley shook her head and went to the board. "Next time, be sure to keep your attention where it belongs, Mr. Powell."

Bryce nodded, blushing as several other students chuckled lightly and shook their heads (they thought it had been some sort of joke!). A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead; he wiped it away. He looked over at Kyna—who was actually smiling. Not looking directly at him, but smiling, laughing to herself—*job well done.*

He looked away, felt a crimson blush spread from head to toe as he gripped the sides of his desk with his hands.

Ms. Featley continued with the lesson, but he could still feel—or at the very least, he could easily imagine—everyone's eyes on him. So he wrangled his waning reserve, waited as patiently as possible until the second half of class, when everyone was paired up once again to finish yesterday's worksheets—and then he laid it out.

"You were, uh, in my dreams," he whispered almost immediately.

Kyna seemed to take his accusation in stride, leaning to one side, smiling almost coyly. "You tell that to all the girls you like?"

He blanched. "Who says I, er, like you?"

"It's just the way guys act when they talk to girls. If there's a lot of effort in it, you know they're trying to hit on you in their own way. Plus, you're all like, 'um... uh...um.' Guys always lose their verbal skills whenever they're trying to talk to a girl they think is cute."

*Is she...*expecting *that I like her?* "Sure, you're, um, cute—but that's not the point. The point is, um, I think you're messing around with me."

"Oh?"

"I don't know. Hypnosis or something. A joke." He thought for a moment, barely enduring her apparent amusement. "I...I just thought I would, um, make it clear...I'm the new guy, I know that. Doesn't mean you have to make it any harder for me." He had to stop himself; the expression on Kyna's face was that of someone who couldn't believe what they were hearing. Yet he knew it was a front. It had to be. *She knows more than she's letting on. I just have to not back down until she admits it.*

"Okay," she said, leaning forward so that their heads were close together. "I'm playing a joke on you. Did you like it?"

Bryce faltered. "Well, um, I—"

"Did I make you *hot*?"

"Well, um—"

"Did I rock your world?"

He didn't say anything. What *could* he say? Now that he'd gone this far...well, if he could snap his fingers and reverse time, he would do it in an instant.

Kyna leaned back in her seat. She was still smiling. "I'm kidding, Bryce. Geez. Are all Texas boys as high-strung as you?"

An intense heat seeped through Bryce's skin, warmed his blood. His resolve disintegrated like so much dust, and despite all the evidence, he felt like he'd made up every last paranormal oddity in a half-assed attempt to...what? To impress Kyna? To make friends with her? To do with her in real life what they'd been doing together in his dreams?

"Oh, God," he moaned in utter embarrassment as he rested his head on the desktop. With a muffled groan he said, "I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry, Kyna. I'm such a dork." He heard her restrained laughter, her controlled amusement (just enough to let him know she wasn't going to immediately move her desk away from him and request another partner for the assignment), and he wished very dearly that he was invisible.

For the remainder of the period, he kept to himself, working on his part of the worksheet. However, when class ended and he moved to replace his desk, Kyna unexpectedly took hold of his hand.

"Hey," she said, staring at him intently, her expression fathoms deeper than it had been moments before. "You said you were sorry, right?"

He swallowed, mesmerized by her touch, ashamed that it had such a potent effect on him. "Yeah."

"Then make it up to me."

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes. “Meet me after school. We’ll grab something to eat.”

Almost before she finished her sentence, he was nodding in agreement.

* * *

There was a Taco Bell several blocks west of Savanna High. Kyna brought along two of her friends, whom she introduced as Anthony and Natalie. Anthony was talkative and outgoing, while Natalie was the quiet type. They didn’t come out and say it, but Bryce guessed they were a couple.

The restaurant was crowded, mostly with students who’d come to supplement the day’s cafeteria lunch. Bryce and his new companions found a cramped corner table near the restrooms and piled their backpacks against the wall.

“What do you want?” asked Kyna, who remained standing as everyone else took their seats. “I’m buying.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Bryce said. “I’ve got cash.”

“I insist.”

He smiled, resisted the urge to insist on purchasing his own food. “Two soft tacos and a medium drink.”

“What about me?” Anthony whined. “Don’t you want to know what I want?”

Kyna stuck out her tongue. “You’re getting quesadillas, like you always do.” She left the table.

Bryce stared after her for a moment. “Is she always like that?”

“Like what?” asked Anthony.

“So...forceful.”

“Don’t worry about it. She knows one of the guys here. Hooks us up most of the time.”

Bryce faced his companions. “Lucky for us.”

“How long have you been in town?” Natalie asked.

“Since last week.”

“From somewhere down south?”

“Texas.”

“Cool.”

Presently, Kyna returned and distributed cups. She sat alone with Bryce as Natalie and Anthony went to fill their drinks. He shared a moment of silence with her, pondering, listening to other people’s orders being rattled off over the loudspeaker.

“So, you’ve met Josh, huh?” asked Kyna.

Bryce scowled. “Sort of. He’s in my first period class. Guess he wanted to make friends. You know him?”

“Not really. He’s just someone you know *of*.”

“Yeah. You kind of have to notice his, um, condition.”

Kyna looked at him strangely now. “What do you mean?”

“His face,” he replied. “What happened to it?”

Kyna bit her lip, stared hard at the tabletop. This prompted Bryce to believe

he'd perhaps touched on something that she didn't want to talk about. *Like maybe Josh's dad abused him or something, and everyone knows the story but doesn't like to think about it.*

"It's okay," he said after a moment. "Never mind."

Luckily, at that moment, the others returned with their drinks. Anthony, unaware of any of the previous uneasiness, patted him on the back and asked, "Hey, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Homework and chores," he replied.

"Why don't you and Kyna come over my place? I'm having a little get-together on Saturday. My parents will be out of town."

Bryce looked at Kyna, whose facial expression metamorphosed instantaneously from introverted to cheerful. "You want to go?"

"Sure," she replied. To Anthony: "What time?"

"Around eight."

"Cool."

The group made smalltalk for another few minutes, until their food was ready, at which point they ate in relative silence—until Kyna surprised Bryce by clearing her throat and saying:

"Bryce says he has dreams about me."

He almost choked on a piece of lettuce. Kyna was smiling at him deviously, elated, no doubt, at his discomfort—yet he didn't feel threatened. He didn't feel as if he were being made fun of. Rather, it was more like camaraderie among friends, a playful jest.

Still, they wanted details.

"You're not serious," he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Why not?" asked Anthony. "It's only a dream, right?"

"It was *my* dream," he replied, glaring now at Kyna.

Natalie spoke up, her voice soft and delicate, and as nonthreatening as could be: "Dreams can actually help you get to know your friends better, and they can help you make new ones, if you interpret them right."

Bryce's facial temperature was quickly rising. "No way."

"Tell us," said Kyna, poking his arm.

"Yeah," added Anthony. "Tell us."

Natalie joined in as well. "Tell."

"Tell us."

"Spill it."

Geez, he thought, semi-aware of the subtle warmth now being directed at him from three separate sources. *If they really want it...* "Okay, fine," he said, and he found himself relaying his nocturnal experiences as if the table had suddenly become a confessional booth. He explained about Kyna and himself, in his bedroom, in his parents' living room—outside, running around naked in the middle of the night. When he was finished, Anthony (on the verge of cracking up) put his hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

"Dude. Too much information."

"Yeah," cooed Natalie, equally as amused. "We didn't ask for porno."

Bryce scowled and was about to point out that it was *they* who'd requested such information when Kyna (having sobered somewhat) touched his hand—and instantly he was tranquil.

"We're just playing, that's all," she said. "I just wanted to let you know that I don't think you're a creep for being honest. None of us do. You're welcome here."

"But what about your boyfriend?" Bryce groaned—still blanketed by Kyna's assurance, but unable to shake the need for confirmation. "I mean, what would he think about some dude telling his girl he's having dirty dreams about her?"

Kyna looked at the others for a moment. There was a spark behind her eyes. "Don't worry about that."

Bryce shrugged, finished off the last of his food.

* * *

Later: Having walked both Bryce and Anthony to their respective homes, Kyna was now able to speak freely with Natalie. They were headed eastward along Lincoln, the late afternoon sun casting across the glass-speckled blacktop of a mini-mart parking lot, when she asked:

"So, what do you think?"

"He's a catch," Natalie responded, smiling. "Cute *and* fully-charged."

"Yeah. Ash's nose still works—and I can see why Josh tried to get his grubby paws on him. Poor bastard's got mush for brains, but at least he has an instinct for tapping."

"I'll say. How do you want to do this?"

Kyna frowned and thought for a moment, knowing exactly what she wanted to do but holding herself back. Playing it cool. "I don't know yet. I think...I think I'm going too fast, to tell you the truth."

"Why's that?"

"I...it's just...there's so much of him, all at once. It wasn't like the others. Usually I don't give a damn when I'm tapping someone, but when I was with him, when I tasted him...he was *so* good, Natalie. I thought I was going to lose it."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't. But I came close." *God, so close.*

Natalie sighed as they came up to a crosswalk. She pressed the button for the light. "I don't think it was you. I think it was just, well, maybe he's got a different makeup. Maybe folks from down south have more *qi* in them. You know how those Texans are: everything larger than life."

Kyna laughed. It was a moment's retreat during an ongoing inner battle between herself, her hormones, and the nameless force surging through her veins. "You know, he can see Josh's, um, skin."

"Wow."

"He can probably see me, too."

Natalie got the point. She stopped once they'd crossed the street and faced

Kyna. "Oh. Did he mention anything?"

"No."

"What about Ash?"

"He didn't mention her either. She's a couple of steps above Joshua anyway. Better at masking."

"Hmm...yeah. Well, she's different. You know that. Sometimes even we can't see her."

Kyna sighed, gazed into the traffic. "Sometimes I wonder if she can even see herself, if she even remembers what she is." She bit her lip—hard. "Natalie, I think I like Bryce."

"Like, or *like*?"

"Like, as in I want him so bad I'm willing to forgo food and sleep just so I can spend every last millisecond in his mind."

"Now, you know you don't mean that."

"I do."

"No," Natalie reiterated, her voice becoming firmer. She reached out and touched Kyna's shoulder. "You don't fall for that kind of thing. You're not a dud."

No, I'm not, Kyna thought, her passion abating somewhat, *but I get hungry just like everybody else. And sometimes I wonder just a little too much about boys and sex and finding Mr. Right so he can whisk me off somewhere away from my mother, away from that house and from all my problems, dreaming he'll take me somewhere I can be his girl and have his kids, and I'll be happier than ever because that's what stereotypical teenage girls want.*

Natalie was obviously aware of her contemplative state. She mustered a half-hearted smile. "It's how we live, Kyna. It's how we survive. We follow the urges, but only so far as we need to. We don't let it get to us—we don't let the people we tap get to us. We get to *them* first, before someone else does, before they realize the truth. Otherwise it's just a good-looking jerk who wants a quick lay so he can blab to the rest of his friends the next day. Then they all come for you, take their turns, and forget all about you once they've had their fill, once you're all tapped out." She folded her arms. "We're better than that."

Yeah, better. "I've never felt this before. Not even with Josh."

"Don't confuse yourself. Remember, Bryce's under your control, so of course he's going to be all into you—but you have to keep to the plan. You have to keep focused. You can't just live off the dreams. You need blood, *qi*—something *real*."

"Easy for you to say," Kyna snorted. "You have Anthony, and he never..." She trailed off. *Never what? Never abused me, never beat the crap out of me until I grew old enough, strong enough to defend myself when my mom wasn't around to protect me from my own father? And now, after all that, I actually want a guy. I* want *that?*

"Kyna."

She looked up into Natalie's eyes, where there was warmth and familiarity—and determination.

"I know how it is. You can meet someone who just seems so different from the others, and you think that maybe he really won't be like all the rest. But he doesn't

know *how*, you see. He's hard-wired—they all are. It's no one's fault, it's just the way people are. Bryce's a good catch, but only if he's under your control. Only if he has a *purpose*. If it were the other way around, what do you think he'd be doing to you right now?"

She was right, of course. Kyna knew that. Good advice from a good friend. She might have relinquished herself to the truth right then and there, but instead she felt her frustration growing. After all, how could anyone else in the world know what it was like to be Kyna Miller except Kyna Miller? *I had to learn all this on my own, and when I was much younger; Natalie only had to make friends with me to learn the ropes, spare herself the pain of living out the rest of her life as a dud. She had someone—I didn't.*

I still don't.

While all this was going on in her mind, Kyna walked Natalie the rest of the way home. When they at last hugged and parted ways, she smiled and waved goodbye as usual—but instead of heading south, toward her mother's house, she went northeast.

To Josh's.

* * *

Kyna wrinkled up her nose as she climbed through Joshua's open bedroom window. The place smelled like dirty socks, and probably hadn't been vacuumed in months.

Joshua himself was sitting huddled on the floor beside the dresser, the tacky orange curtains (which he'd almost certainly picked out himself) flapping gently against his knees. He was still wearing the clothes he'd put on Monday morning and, as was evidenced by the jar of urine he clutched tightly in his hands, he obviously hadn't left the room for any reason.

Just like I instructed, she thought, disgusted.

Immediately, she went over to his closet, rummaged through the mess until she found a clean towel. She threw it at him. "Take a shower—and wash *everything*. And don't tell your mom I'm here."

Joshua nodded, shuffled out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Kyna sighed and unloaded her backpack, which she placed on the floor beside the bed. She kicked off her shoes as well and took the opportunity to explore the room, which was buried beneath a growing layer of clutter. She disregarded most of it and knelt beside the bed, lifted the top mattress to reveal a hidden cache of dirty magazines, as well as a handful of unopened condom packages.

What a nasty little bugger, she thought, replacing the mattress. *Like a squirrel, just not as resourceful.*

In due time, the bedroom door opened and Joshua entered. His hair glistened, and he had a towel wrapped around his waist. He held his dirty clothes in a bundle.

"Ditch those," she instructed, "and put on something clean. Something you'd wear to school."

He did as he was told, tossing the bundle onto the floor and scouring his dresser for a T-shirt, hoodie, jeans, underwear, and socks. Once dressed, he waited obediently as Kyna stepped close to him, leaned in so she could smell him. When she was satisfied that he'd done an acceptable job bathing himself, she nodded and guided him onto the floor so that the two of them were sitting cross-legged and facing each other.

"Okay, here's the deal," she said. "I'm going to meet Bryce. You're going to stay here and wait for me."

Joshua nodded. There was a thread of saliva oozing from between his parted lips.

"Good. I want you to sleep while I'm gone. Or just lie here and watch the ceiling. I don't care. No masturbating. If I find out you've so much as *looked* at my crotch, I'll slit your throat. Understand?"

He nodded again, his eyes heavy-lidded and opaque.

"All right," she said, and clasped his hands, closed her eyes and pushed outward with her mind, forcing herself to expand beyond flesh and bone so that her essence was suddenly floating over her body, observing the scene below, coaxing Joshua out of his own shell. She latched onto him, drew him outward like poison from a wound. Without guidance he would have merely receded back into his body after a moment, but Kyna had other plans.

Time for a little swap, Josh, she thought intensely as she concentrated on a mental image of her physical self. *Just go inside, let yourself slip right in, like water flowing into a storm drain. You're waking up. That's it...you're waking up...*

She felt him acquiescing, slipping into her body as she transferred herself into his. In a moment it was all over, and she opened her eyes to find herself gasping and panting in Joshua's body. She was somewhat spent, for such transfers drew considerably upon one's reserves. It was, however, not above her skills, and so, after a few minutes of rest, the euphoria of the swap ebbed. She propped herself up on her elbows. Naturally, in Joshua's body, she was no longer in direct control of her female body; Joshua was in control now, though she could still direct his thoughts well enough so that he wouldn't get into trouble wandering around as a girl.

When she'd cooled somewhat, she let him go and got to her feet. As she did this, Joshua collapsed face-first onto the floor, like a lifeless puppet.

"Jesus," she muttered, and helped him to roll over onto his back. So intoxicated was he by her influence that he simply lay there, limbs splayed every which way.

"You're a vegetable," she muttered. Nevertheless, this was how it had to be if she wanted him pliable enough to control. She helped him onto the bed. "I want you to do just like you do at school. I want you to press yourself between everyone's attention, make yourself invisible to everyone but me. If your mom or anyone comes looking for you, I want you to concentrate so that they forget why they need to see you, so that they won't want or need to see you until I say it's okay for them to do so. No one comes in here but me—understand?"

Joshua nodded, his expression pitiful. It was painful to watch, considering that it was her face he was wearing at the moment.

Kyna scowled. *Have a little self-respect, for Christ's sake. You look like a goddamn...never mind. Doesn't matter. You're not going anywhere anyway.*

Leaving the bed, she grabbed her backpack and hoisted it over her newly-masculine shoulders as she headed for the window. She was about to climb through when she happened to glance at her reflection in the dresser mirror.

"Oh, crap," she gasped, swallowing hard. Joshua's mottled appearance, usually masked by his knack, was now manifesting itself with all the allure of a slice of cheese bubbling under a heat lamp.

This won't do.

Focusing her concentration, she worked on smoothing skin, regrowing hair. In a moment she was once again a normal seventeen-year-old—save for the fact that she was really a girl occupying a boy's body. On the outside, though, the difference was seamless—better than she'd expected, considering she was in someone *else's* body, manipulating someone *else's* design.

She left the bedroom, climbing through the window and jogging along the street. She formulated her game plan as she went, an electric thrill coursing throughout her. It was something she hadn't felt in a long time, and it both frightened and excited her.

Like streaking, she thought. *Losing control, except I never really lose control. Not like everyone else. No, I still know how to make it fun. Doesn't have to be an addiction. I deserve a little break now and then. Can't go through life always holding back—sometimes I'm allowed to go a little wild, release some pressure.*

Have some fun.

Chapter 17

When Bryce turned up at the warehouse half an hour late citing an after-school test and a troublesome bus ride, Edward wasn't all that annoyed. After all, it was only a part time job, and Bryce was being paid under the table; a necessary absence or two wouldn't bring about the end of the world—even if said absences involved ingesting fast food with Kyna and her friends.

Jack was his usual greasy self, working alongside Bryce and cracking tasteless sex jokes within earshot of the female employees. When quitting time came, he insisted on having a smoke out in the parking lot before the drive home.

"There's a new gal over in Inventory," he explained, leaning coolly against the corrugated warehouse wall and lacing his bloodstream with nicotine. "I think I'll get her number, add it to the list—just in case I've got nothing to do this weekend."

Bryce, preoccupied with the finicky vending machine, snorted contemptuously. "What makes you think she'll have time for you?"

"Because I've got a knack for women."

"Ah. The tongue thing?" He withdrew a Dr. Pepper from the machine—even though he'd really wanted a Coke—and settled himself against the wall.

Jack started to answer, but at that moment a tall, elegant redhead exited one the office portables at the opposite end of the lot and started walking toward her car. She conversed on her cell phone as she moved through alternating spaces of evening darkness and frosted LED lighting, her hair a vibrant spray, a fiery beacon.

She was obviously way out of Jack's league—yet here he was, winking and taking one last drag from his cigarette as he started boldly across the lot. He met her at her car, smiling as warmly as if he'd been a friend of hers for years. Momentarily, she put away her phone and started talking to him. They spoke for several minutes, during which time Jack made her laugh more than once, and during which time she exchanged phone numbers with him.

It made Bryce think of Edward and his mother.

Jack returned triumphant. "You see? *That's* what it's all about."

"Nah-ah," said Bryce, wiping some ambient perspiration from his forehead. "That was you talking to someone you already knew and pretending she was just some random chick so you could impress me."

"Now why would I put the effort into something like that?" Jack shook his head. "Naw, what you just saw was a precision mack being thrown."

"Precision *knack*," Bryce corrected.

"Whatever."

"And you do this all the time? Pick up random women in parking lots?"

"All I need are my women. New upgrade every night. You tell me that's not heaven."

"It's lonely," Bryce replied, thoughtfully. "I'd have to have someone there with me for more than a night or two. I'd want something more...long-term."

Jack addressed the air as if a third person had suddenly materialized between himself and Bryce. "Geez, seventeen and the kid's already got it in his head that he's a one-woman man. Let me ask you, straight out: Have you ever slept with a girl?"

Bryce sighed without answering.

"That's right," Jack continued. "You're Mister Manners and all, but let's say you've messed around with a couple of your girlfriends. Each of them was the One until she wasn't. So what? You think you got it wrong by not having kept every single girl who gave you the tinglies? Naw, if you're looking for love, kiddo, it don't exist. At least, not around here. People use people to get what they want, that's all it is. We're all just practicing on each other until we meet the One. But the One never comes, does she?"

"You're not much of an optimist, are you?"

"Nope." Jack snuffed out his cigarette and nodded toward the car. "Come on, let's get going."

* * *

Bryce got home to find Daniel and Julia collaborating in the kitchen on a dinner of lemoned trout.

"Someone named Josh came by earlier," Julia mentioned as Bryce ducked into the refrigerator for a soda. "He left a phone number."

"Okay," Bryce replied. He mumbled a quick "hi" to Daniel and then went upstairs to his room, where he found the yellow sticky note Julia had plastered on the door—the family's antiquated message system, as it were, and seal of confirmation that his mother had not actually entered the sacred space that was Bryce's bedroom.

He removed the note and went inside. He hadn't a clue as to why Joshua would even *try* calling on him—especially after their last unsuccessful meeting.

Disinterested, he crumpled the note, tossed it into the wastebasket, and spread himself out on the bed for the evening's homework. However, half an hour in, he suddenly felt an uncomfortable heat developing under his skin. Even after removing his socks and shirt, the feeling intensified to the point where he felt almost physically constricted.

Leaving his bed, he made a circuit of his room, paused beside the wastebasket long enough to remove the crumpled sticky note. Then, obeying an unrealized whim, he fished his cell phone from out of his backpack and keyed in Joshua's number.

Joshua answered momentarily. "*Yeah?*"

"Hey," Bryce said, his fever suddenly vanquished. "It's Bryce."

"*Oh, hi, Bryce.*"

"You came by earlier?"

"*Yeah. You were out or something.*"

"I was working."

"*Oh, you have a job?*"

"Mm-hm. Moving boxes, lugging stuff around. It's a real no-brainer kind of thing."

"*I like your accent. 'Kan-duh thang.'*"

Bryce scowled. "Very funny."

"*Just messing with you, buddy.*"

"Dude, we're not exactly friends, so if you could just get to the point—"

"*Aren't we impatient? Okay, then. I want you to go with me to the mall tomorrow, after school.*"

"The mall?" *Why the heck would I want to do that?* He started to politely decline, but something caught his tongue, something tightened in his chest. Instead he said, "Um...I don't have work tomorrow, so sure, I'd love to go."

"*Awesome. We'll meet by the flagpole, out in front of the school.*"

"Cool."

Bryce ended the call, his head buzzing with something thick and heavy. His thoughts had become jumbled. The only pristine thread was the fact that he had an appointment with Joshua tomorrow, and that was all that mattered—despite his distaste for anything that had to do with the guy.

He attempted to resume his homework, but, in a haze, ended up turning off the light and going right to bed instead.

* * *

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of Joshua's bedroom, Kyna clutched her cell phone in her hand and pondered her options. She'd been occupying Joshua's body since the afternoon, which meant that for several hours she'd been exerting an enormous amount of control keeping herself and Joshua swapped—and it was starting to wear on her.

Hell, she thought, recalling how she'd jogged all the way to Bryce's house, knocked so eagerly on the door—only to be greeted by his mother, who delivered the news that Bryce wouldn't be in until evening. *A whole afternoon wasted.*

She looked over at Joshua (still occupying her body), sitting slumped on his bed. "Don't give me that look," she grumbled. "You wanted to be friends with him, after all, so this is your chance."

Actually, he wasn't giving her a look so much as he was simply staring mindlessly in her direction.

I could switch us back for the night, she thought, which would get rid of the stress of maintaining myself in this body—*but then I'd have to burn mad* qi *again.* She grimaced. Expending herself once in a twenty-four-hour period was hard enough; twice would be unbearable. *Hell, might as well just stay put until*

tomorrow. She sighed and lay back on the bed. *No problem. It's just a day. I'll pass the time somehow.*

Joshua, having sensed her thoughts, giggled and puckered his lips.

Watch it, Kyna thought, and kicked him in the shin—though not too hard, for he *was* occupying her body.

Joshua behaved himself for the remainder of the night, which was good, because as each hour passed with excruciating slowness, the stress became worse and worse. Even when Kyna released her hold on the ragged contour of Joshua's skin, thereby allowing his body to settle itself somewhat naturally, there was still the constant stream of concentration that had to be maintained to keep herself situated properly, to keep Joshua's essence from wandering out of her body and back into his own. It would have been immensely easier if he'd been coherent enough to carry half the load, like he'd done back when they'd swapped bodies the first time, back when they'd actually been friends. Such was not the case now, however, and so Kyna had to go it alone. She'd been able to maintain herself in Joshua's body for several days, with his help; now she guessed she'd have less than half that amount of time before her strength gave.

She took to tossing and turning on Joshua's floor, dozing fitfully because she knew if she allowed herself to fall into a deep sleep, her essence would default back into her feminine body.

By the time dawn came, her hands were quivering slightly and the blood was rushing in her ears. Her stomach grumbled, demanded attention, reminded her that she would soon be at the mercy of a hunger that had nothing to do with the necessity of food...but she held firmly to her plans, her emotional needs, her hidden desires to be something more than a series of instinctive wants and yearnings.

Got to hold out for something more.

Chapter 18

Kyna was absent from school the next day. During lunch Bryce found out from Natalie and Anthony that she hadn't been feeling well, and had stayed home. Beyond that, her friends were vague about her actual ailment. Without their chieftain they seemed preoccupied and distant. So, like an older brother who'd promised to take his sibling out for ice cream, he went to the flagpole at three o'clock and waited for Joshua.

Rotten way to spend my day off, he thought, wanting to go home, but unable to shake the inexplicable sense of curious obligation that had somehow been seeded in him since last night's phone call.

After a while Joshua arrived. He was clad in a hoodie and jeans, but perhaps the most interesting thing about him was the fact that he didn't look like a burn victim anymore. His tanned skin was smooth, unblemished. He had a full head of hair. And he carried himself with confidence.

"Wow," gasped Bryce, surprised. "You're, um...you're all..."

Joshua's face twitched. He had bags under his eyes. "I'm what?"

"I...it's just...your face is smooth and all. No, um, marks."

"Oh, that. Yeah."

"But...how?"

Rolling his eyes, Joshua seemed frustrated, but responded anyway: "Well, have you ever watched a magic show? Ever been to someone's birthday party and they had a magician there doing parlor tricks?"

"That's what this is? A parlor trick?"

"Sort of. More of an illusion, really. Anyone can do it—you can look it up online. Let's go and catch the bus."

Bryce wasn't convinced. However, any further questions regarding the matter were forgotten before they could be asked. He followed Joshua across the lawn.

"You should let your hair down. You'd look much better that way."

Bryce ran his hand over the top of his head. "What makes you say that?"

Joshua swore under his breath. "Never mind."

* * *

The mall was bustling when they arrived. Many students from Savanna were there, though hardly anyone took the effort to say hello. The ones who did—the girls, in particular—waved to Bryce rather than to Joshua.

"I've never seen so much Spandex," Bryce said once they'd made their way to

the second-floor food court and ordered Chinese food from one of the counters.

Joshua, sitting across from him at the small table they'd snagged, snorted disdainfully. "All the girls around here dress like that. They prance around looking like all they want in life is for their butt to get noticed, then when they *do* get noticed, they get offended, they act like they can't imagine why anyone would stare at them."

"Double standard."

"I'll say. So, is Anaheim anything like your home town?"

Bryce laughed. "I guess. I mean, it's not just a strip of sand and cactus." He sighed wistfully, remembering a girl's face, trying to recall her name. His head was in a funk. "It was home. I had friends there."

"I figured," Joshua agreed, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "You don't appreciate something until you lose it."

"Not that you always have a choice. I was fine with my girlfriend, but she was too...anxious. She was always talking about missing things, missing experiences that she was supposed to have during her high school years. Parties, football games, concerts. I was too 'old fashioned' for her. I always wanted to stay in and make out."

Joshua made a face. "Must've been hell."

"Well, not really."

"Did you ever do the deed with her?"

"We messed around a little, but it wasn't all about getting laid."

"So you've never...?"

"No."

"Don't you want to?"

Sex or love? "Why all the questions?"

Joshua shrugged, leaned back in his chair. His expression was suddenly tranquil. "I just want to get to know you."

"*Right*. By psychoanalyzing my sex life."

"Hey, you can learn a lot from a guy by the way he shares."

"You're a perv," Bryce responded, something in him twitching, a spark of memory faltering. Something in Joshua's manner was familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

"Yeah, I am. So, the ex aside, have you ever screwed anyone, guy or girl?"

"Why's it so important?"

"Come on, just tell."

"Fine. If you must know, no, I haven't *screwed* anyone."

"How come? Saving it for marriage?"

"Well, yeah. I guess."

Frowning, Joshua leaned forward. "So, you're looking for real love?"

"Aren't we all?"

"But how do you know what real love is until you *feel* it? I mean, you can think you like someone, you think they're interesting to talk to or they're cute or whatever, but you can't feel something *real* until you're brave enough to give

yourself to someone who's willing to show you their love physically."

Bryce shook his head. "You can't measure your love for someone by how good they are in bed."

"But you have to admit, it can be a great litmus test."

"Maybe. It would depend. Have *you* ever done it with anyone based on those standards?"

The color left Joshua's face, and he looked away, biting his lip, considering something barely palatable, it seemed. When he looked back, there was a quivering behind his eyes. "Let's go catch a movie."

"No changing the subject!" Bryce exclaimed, playfully—but Joshua had already left the table and was making his way across the court.

Bryce pursued, barely keeping up with his companion as they walked down to the mall's multiplex. When they were standing together in line he noticed Joshua was breathing somewhat heavily, and was sweating. He asked what was wrong and suddenly he became dizzy, his mind clouding over. It was so bad that Joshua had to grab him to keep him from falling down.

"Freakin' Chinese food," Bryce mumbled, stumbling toward the restroom.

Joshua looped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him toward one of the theater entrances instead. "Don't worry about it. You just need to get off your feet."

Bryce was too inebriated to protest, too confused to wonder why Joshua's body was so excruciatingly hot. He allowed himself to be directed into the theater, where Joshua found adjoining seats near the back. In his current state it was easy to simply sit slumped in his seat and stare dumbly at the screen—so of course he didn't catch Joshua staring intently at him, scrutinizing him as one might a famous painting. Bryce was lost within his own space, the surround sound filling his ears, the darkness of the theater pressing in, the buzz of his senses leading him into an ethereal world.

Suddenly there was warmth against his cheek, and he turned to see Kyna, dressed in Joshua's clothes, still in her own seat, and yet it seemed like the two of them were pressed intimately against one another—

"What are you doing?" Bryce whispered, alarmed, unable to move, but somehow sublimely relaxed.

Just like in the dreams...

Kyna leaned over, brushing her nose against Bryce's. Beads of sweat, illuminated by the light of the movie screen, matted her hair, trickled down her forehead.

"Kyna—"

"I can see why Josh honed in on you," she murmured. "So much...so much waiting to be tapped. And yet you're just *you*, not like the others, not a show-off or a creep, but someone who's just himself. So absolutely pure and untainted..." Kyna kissed him, pulled back slightly, lingering face to face. "You don't know how it is. They'll just hurt you, but I'll take care of you. We can take care of each other, okay?"

Bryce squirmed, tried to ignore an overwhelming ache that suddenly filled his every fiber—

Kiss me.

—tried to understand why he was tilting his head and allowing Kyna to go for seconds, thirds, fourths.

Please...help me...please...

Bryce's thoughts or someone else's, he couldn't be sure, but he did know that he was filled with such utter wanting that it didn't matter anymore who, what, or where he was. He was paralyzed with emotion that came from within himself and from all around, blending with his breath mixing with Kyna's essence all around him, reaching, searching, and—

Oh, God.

* * *

Kyna knew she was teetering on the edge of her own sanity, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Too much, all at once. Thought I could handle it, but I can't—how could I? All this time, pretending I'm unbreakable, better than the others...I'm no better. Going to let this happen...let it happen...

She felt herself trembling, wanting, hungering.

This is what you want, right? Ashley tasted *him, but you're going to* have *him. Don't care if anyone sees you...so hungry...take in as much of him as you can, before he makes any noise—then run. Exit's right behind you. No one will ever know. Just like the others...just let it happen.*

She didn't sprout fangs, didn't get all red-eyed like the cheesy vampires you saw in the movies. This was much more subtle, a kiss on the neck, ordinary, everyday incisors pressed against smooth flesh. She was poised on the brink, ready to bite when, inexplicably, something within her snapped and she found herself peering through a small window of clarity. She saw herself (in her female body, despite the fact that she was physically in Joshua's) leaning into Bryce, her mouth gaping open obscenely—and she was overcome with shame and disgust for what she was about to do.

No...no! This isn't what I want.

* * *

The revulsion overcame Bryce quickly, and it helped him to clear his thoughts as he watched his companion stumble uncertainly to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Joshua mumbled, backing out of the aisle, tripping over the other seats. He lingered a moment, then tore himself away, ran for the exit.

Bryce's head rolled back against his seat back, and he felt himself falling into himself. He groaned, suddenly realizing that he was losing his grasp on the chair beneath him—he was losing his grasp on his own body. A storm raged fiercely, all

around him. Lightning flashed, wind whipped at his skin and shrieked through his ears. He closed his eyes, but the flashes of lightning were behind his eyelids as well, trying to dig into his brain, trying to fuse mind and matter together once again. In a moment he knew the storm would have him, and he would be lost forever in an imaginary ocean.

There was the movie theater, but it was away from him, on the other side of an imperceptible rift. He could see himself, or, more accurately, he could see his body, sitting slumped in its seat. Part of him was afraid of the sight, and almost frantic to get back inside; another part was intrigued, elated—mesmerized by the experience of occupying a space outside his own flesh.

Fear won out over amazement, though, as he was suddenly spiraling downward at a sickening speed and being thrust back into himself like too many items of clothing being stuffed into a suitcase—

—breath, blood...pain. Bryce convulsed violently for a moment as he was dumped cruelly back into his body. His head throbbed as he sat up in his seat, opening his eyes. He was himself again, he realized, and even though Joshua was gone, he could still taste his kisses, could still feel his embrace.

Bastard, he thought, tears welling up in his eyes. With a sudden wave of nausea washing over him, he stood uncertainly, making his way out of the theater as best as he could without running into anything or anyone. Thankfully, no one paid him any attention.

The lights of the lobby were excruciatingly bright as he scouted out the men's room, entered and threw himself into one of the stalls. Falling to his knees, he vomited. When he was through he remained leaning over the bowl, crying, not caring if anyone heard. He no longer knew what to think or feel; he only knew that he'd been violated in an unexplainable way, and that he'd allowed it to happen, allowed himself to be suckered right into Joshua's ploy.

Just like with Cal in the gym...Coach Stieffel...with Sheryl at the pool. Should've seen it coming—why didn't I realize what was happening?

It wasn't merely because he was straight and Joshua, evidently, was gay. Joshua had forced himself on Bryce, had gotten inside his head. In retrospect, he never would have called Joshua back, yet...what had caused him to do just that? Curiosity? Or did it have more to do with that warm buzz that seemed to fill his head every time he was attacked by someone with the uncanny knack? Was he doomed from the start every time someone started puppeteering him?

He sniffed, wiped his face with a wad of toilet tissue. If he'd still been a kid, he would have gone right home, told his parents what had happened, perhaps even cried in Julia's arms. She would have comforted and coddled him in her own way. Daniel, intending the best, would have beaten around the bush until at last reminding his son that prevention was the path to victory. If only Bryce had listened to the signals, seen the signs.

Doesn't matter, he thought. *This is all some kind of twisted reality. If I somehow got my parents to understand, to believe me, it still wouldn't do any good. I would still be the one who has to face the bullies everyday. No, I'm on my own. Always been this*

way, living in the same house with my parents, but I still have to take care of myself.

After a time, he composed himself and left the stall. There was no one else in the restroom. He walked over to one of the sinks and splashed water onto his face. The skin around his eyes was swollen—*so pale, like I'm stoned or hungover or something.*

There was something else, too: a glow, a sort of halo extending several inches from his body—as if his aura had not fully settled itself just yet. Curious, he reached toward the mirror, felt, just for a moment, that he might actually be able to touch a duplicate version of himself inhabiting a reflected realm in an alternate universe. However, the moment his fingertips came into contact with the mirror, the halo was gone.

Chapter 19

Kyna was subdued during the ride home. She sat quietly in her seat at the back of the bus and gazed through the window, taking in random details of the Anaheim sprawl as she rolled her tongue around in her mouth. The metallic tinge of human blood was still there, sparking memories of her recent successful attempt at satisfying herself. For now, anyway.

Not hard in this city, she thought bitterly, recalling how she'd exited the rear of the mall after parting ways with Bryce, had scouted the parking lot for a suitable partner. In this case it had been a forty-something guy—as uninspired as all the rest, but trailing his own secret taboos as if he'd painted them upon a large, colorful banner to be carried around with him wherever he went. Most of these sorts of creatures wanted women or girls, some wanted men or boys. This particular dud had fallen into the latter category. As such, Kyna (wearing Joshua's skin) had followed him to his car and offered herself to him.

There hadn't been too much to it after that. They'd retired to the backseat of his Lexus and she'd tapped him without reserve, without even a pretense at foreplay. In a mixture of uncontrollable hunger and fiery hatred, she'd torn into his flesh with her teeth, summoning blood, eliciting sustenance. He'd been none too pure, but still immensely satisfying.

And now here she was, past the point, satiated, overfed—bloated. She knew she'd let it get the best of her, and she hated herself more than ever for demonstrating such weakness. And yet it wasn't all that bad, because it had been Joshua's body in the backseat of the car, Joshua's face buried in the man's neck, and it would be Joshua's problem dealing with whatever filthy microbes that may have jumped the gap.

I get the qi*, he gets one more infection to add to the list. Doesn't matter. Shouldn't matter.*

Yet it *did* matter. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach, the guilt and anguish at what she'd done to a complete stranger using a body that didn't belong to her. It made her feel like a vagrant, a criminal—an outcast from society sitting huddled on some godforsaken bus that smelled faintly of sweat and alcohol. There was an idiotic-looking man who'd just gotten on; now he was sitting across from her, girl-hungry eyes scanning her male body, somehow sensing her true self hidden beneath the layers of Joshua's flesh—

—I don't want to be here anymore.

* * *

It was night when Joshua awoke to find himself, aching and exhausted, lying sprawled face-down on his bed. For a moment he couldn't recall how he'd gotten this way—and then it hit him as his brain suddenly turned itself on, filtering the day's memories like slides from a dream, scenes from a nightmare. Although he hadn't been present in his body during Kyna's misadventures, his mind retained an afterimage. Upon remembering the strange man, writhing and gasping in the back of the Lexus, he felt his abdominals clench involuntarily as his stomach tried to empty itself—and that's when he noticed just how much trouble he was in. Not only had Kyna blatantly misused his body, she'd almost completely drained his essence as well.

He rolled onto his side, tried to sit up, but his strength eluded him. Momentarily, he was unable, even, to keep his eyes open, and he fell back into a dreamless sleep.

He awoke several times during the night, his body alternating between fever and chills. Throughout, the only bit of lucid, conscious thought he could muster came in the form of various pleadings for it to be over. The pain, the fever—his life, if need be.

Anything but this.

* * *

The bus deposited Bryce near his parents' house at a little after six o'clock. He rushed inside immediately to shower and disinfect his mouth, though no amount of grooming would ever cleanse him of the memory of today. When his skin was pink and raw, when the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were wrinkled like prunes, he finally switched off the water and went into his bedroom, where he sat cross-legged on the floor and pondered what to do next. When nothing came to mind, he went to see what his mother was preparing for dinner. The normal social interaction would do him good. He hoped.

Downstairs, the kitchen table had been half-set, and there was a roast cooling on the stovetop, but Julia was nowhere to be found. Neither was Daniel. Bryce wondered if, in his rush to get into the shower, he'd missed some vital detail.

He was about to call out when a noise from outside caught his attention. Muffled sighing, scuffling, heavy breathing wafting in through the screen door, which stood slightly ajar. He moved toward it, though he didn't actually have to go outside in order to assess the situation: the noises were coming from the tool shed, and they were unmistakably those made by a couple in the throes of passion.

Please, no, he thought, backing away from the door, bumping into the table. *Don't let this happen.* But he knew it *was* happening. Daniel's car hadn't been in the driveway. He hadn't seen Edward's, but he knew. The look the man had given him previously, after being interrupted on the stoop, with Julia...it had been the look of someone with unfinished business.

Sitting himself at the table and gripping the sides with his hands, he waited. Several minutes passed. The shed door squeaked open, and Bryce heard the sound

of footsteps disappearing down the driveway.

Fleeing the crime scene.

Julia appeared in the doorway, her hair out of place, her clothing rumpled. She looked surprised to see him.

"Oh, Bry," she breathed. "You're home."

He didn't say anything (what *could* he say?). She moved past him, toward the sink. "How was the mall?" she continued. She'd turned on the water full blast so that the hiss of the faucet filled the kitchen. "Do they have a candle shop?"

No, Mom, he thought. *You can't hide this. When I was little you used to cover it up, used to hide under the covers whenever I'd accidentally walk in on you and Dad in the bedroom...but you could never hide the smell. You can't hide it now.*

When he didn't answer, she turned around to face him, a pained expression on her face. "Well? Are you just going to sit there," she whispered, a tear trickling down her cheek, "or are you going to *say* something?"

Oh.

He bit his lip, forced himself to look at her without spite, for he now realized his mother's transgression hadn't merely been a case of knowing better and doing it anyway. Of *course* it hadn't been like that. *What was I thinking? God, she's in this just as deep as I am. We all are.* She couldn't have resisted Edward's will any better than Bryce himself could have resisted Joshua's.

Because we're newcomers—we're victims.

Duds.

He wanted to go to her side, to hold her, tell her that it had happened to him as well, that they could go through this together. Instead, he froze up, became rooted to the spot. *Can't comfort myself, so how am I supposed to comfort her?*

Julia sniffed and wiped her face on the back of her hand. "Oh, I'm sorry. I...I don't know what's come over me." She took a moment to compose herself before heading for the living room.

"Do you, um, need some help with dinner?" Bryce asked, getting up.

Julia paused at the threshold. "That's okay. Hey, I have an idea." She went over to the end table beside the sofa, picked up her purse. "I saw this little doughnut shop down by the pizza place. Why don't you drop by and get us something for dessert? I'll set up the DVD player. We can do movie night just like the old days." She held out a twenty dollar bill.

"Okay," Bryce murmured, offering his silent agreement not to make a big deal of things. At least, not at the onset of the Powells' downward spiral.

He took the cash, headed upstairs for his shoes. He was searching for socks when he heard the shower running—Julia's attempt at ridding herself of any evidence of her tool shed transgression.

As he left the house, he caught sight of Nathan, beer can in hand, reclining on his front porch. Typically, whenever he saw the man, there was nothing more than a stern frown and narrowing of the eyes to denote life behind the sun-browned mask of his face. On this particular evening, as Bryce crossed the concrete lawn, he noticed that Nathan was watching him more closely than usual.

He wondered if he'd heard Edward and his mother having at it in the shed.

"How's it going?" Bryce called out, slowing his pace.

"One more notch in the withered trunk of life," Nathan replied, sighing.

Bryce stopped.

"Something the matter?" asked Nathan.

"Naw," Bryce said. He started toward the end of the cul-de-sac once again, but before he'd taken more than a handful of steps, he was suddenly going the other way, crossing Nathan's driveway and stepping onto the porch. He stood over the man, his voice hoarse as he spoke: "Yeah...something's the matter. Everything's wrong—everything's falling apart."

Nathan got to his feet, launched into a rant about politics and socialism gone bad; halfway through, Bryce broke down and started sobbing. Without realizing it, he embraced the man, held him close and wished it were Daniel—wished it *could* be Daniel. As it was, he stood holding crazy old Nathan Brown, the leery-eyed next door neighbor who kept a life-sized garden doppelganger in his backyard jungle and whose paranoid outlook on life was hardly the medicine needed to soothe a teenage boy's jaded spirits.

For the moment, though, it was just enough.

After a while, Nathan said, "The bullies have gotten to you, have they?"

"I hate them," Bryce whispered. "The people at school, they all tease me. It's all a game to them, but I have to deal with it, I have to walk away with the problem, and I see them looking like nothing ever happened, and all this time I know they can do it again and again, and I *hate* them..."

Nathan held him at arm's length. "Assertion is all that's needed. A mind that thinks for itself—*thoughts* instead of *reactions*. I could teach you a few things."

Bryce wasn't listening. His mind was in tatters. He stepped back from Nathan, suddenly feeling supremely embarrassed. "I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—I have to go to the store."

He left the porch, jogged down the street.

Chapter 20

The rest of the week was difficult. School was a therapeutic process, which Bryce endured only because Joshua was nowhere to be found. At night, sleep came in uneven bursts. Though Bryce's muscles were sore and his bones weary from work, his brain continued to slave away in the dusty coal mine of his mind as thoughts and emotions ordered themselves into patterns of chaos. More often than not, he lay quite awake, wrapped in constricting sheets and anxious sweat glistening between shadows flecked with the vague shapes of his bedroom. In one corner, a pair of movie-going buddies making out at the back of a theater; in another, the outline of a tomboy-exhibitionist girl, crouched, ready to pounce; between the dresser and the closet door, a spell-wielding P.E. coach awaiting the proper moment to execute a bout of paralysis.

On Thursday, class periods one through four were an amalgam of studious faces and dusty blackboards crammed between blotted lines of dollar store looseleaf and Bryce's own unordered thoughts. Whenever anyone spoke to him, it was his brain that responded, not himself.

Despite the incongruity of his erotic dreams (which had mysteriously gone on hiatus), the only coherent moments were, inexplicably, those shared with Kyna during algebra class. It was comparable to suddenly stepping inside some warm, dry sanctuary during a torrential rain—though if Bryce *felt* utterly wretched, Kyna *looked* it. She had dark, puffy circles around her eyes, and her hair was not as well-tended as usual, her posture not as straight and proud as it should have been.

"Hey," he greeted, depositing his backpack on the floor beside his desk and walking over to Kyna's. She'd already settled herself and was now sitting somewhat slumped as she awaited the tardy bell and roll call and all the other monotonous formalities of high school life.

"My boyfriend broke up with me," she murmured, staring at her desktop.

He asked her if she wanted to talk about it.

She didn't.

On Friday, it was much the same, and Bryce felt a yearning inside, as if something wasn't as it should have been, as if there was an empty spot inside him that was directly related to Kyna's happiness.

"You're still going to the party, right?" he asked after class, when everyone was lined up near the door for dismissal. In all honesty he wasn't in the mood for parties; he merely wanted to go home and brood in his bedroom for the entire weekend. *But maybe that's not the right thing to do, because then I'll be thinking of her the entire time and wishing I could be doing something to make her feel better. If*

we're together I can at least try.

She shrugged. "Are you going?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, if you are, I m-mean..." He swallowed, stuttering, not knowing why. "P-please go. It...it won't be the same without you. I don't know the others that well yet, and...I just want you to go." He put his hand over his mouth, his cheeks suddenly flushed. He didn't understand his insistence, didn't know why it was so important for her to acknowledge his predicament, to establish herself as the single focal point of his own sanity he now realized she'd become. Boyfriend or no boyfriend, perhaps if he interacted with her, made her a real friend and not just a sexual fantasy, it would alleviate his embarrassing nocturnal fixation.

Kyna looked a bit perplexed, cocking her head to one side, looking...confused? Hopeful? Devastated? Surrendering willingly to something—but to what?

"I'll be there," she said.

* * *

At work, Bryce was able to focus on the basic task of carrying and stacking, keeping his mounting hatred for Edward at bay until quitting time, when he was required to pay a visit to the man's office for his weekly earnings.

As usual, Edward made little effort to acknowledge his presence (beyond what was necessary to maintain an efficient, working environment). He was talking to someone on his cell phone as he flipped through his file cabinet. Bryce bit his lip and waited near the door as he struggled with himself, tried with all his might not to leap at the jackal who'd tainted his family's well. Physically, Bryce was tall for his age, and powerfully-built—but Edward was a full-grown man, with a man's growth, a man's experience. He also had the knack, which meant he could probably will Bryce to hurl himself through the window long before any sort of serious fight broke out. Besides, Bryce didn't know for sure, he hadn't actually seen the man leave the shed that night. Yet...he *knew*.

"Ah, Bryce," Edward said after several minutes on the phone. He grinned broadly as he closed his laptop and slid it into its carry case. "How'd you do your first week on the job? Ready for the weekend?"

Bryce responded immediately, but the words that came out of his mouth had nothing to do with Edward's question: "You were with my mom."

The smile disappeared from Edward's face. He came around from behind the desk, stood in front of Bryce. Looking down at him, seeming impossibly taller now, his eyes became wicked sparks. "Did she tell you that?"

Every hair on Bryce's body stood on end. He felt his blood begin to boil. "I heard you. In the shed."

"Did you, now?"

"My dad could take you." *I could take you.*

"Oh, Daniel?" Edward laughed. "Another pretty-boy, though he's had the dignity to admit he's past the point, nowadays—but I suppose that's what seventeen years behind a desk will do to you. And now here's his carbon-copy son,

just beginning the same downhill skid, absolutely *shocked* to discover that his saint of a mother can't keep her panties on. The audacity!"

Bryce might have thrown himself at the man right then and there, but he found himself frozen, rooted to the spot.

Edward continued, reaching for his wallet. "But that's how the world works, son. Some are born to lead, others to follow. You may want to beat the living crap out of me, you may have the brawn to back it up, even, but you're still just a *dud*." He tucked a twenty-dollar bill into Bryce's pocket, then leaned in close, poked Bryce's forehead with his index finger. "Now get lost."

* * *

Kyna tensed when she heard Natalie's voice at the other end of the phone line:

"*Hello?"*

She cleared her throat. "Hey. It's Kyna."

"*Hi, Kyna. What's up?"*

"Nothing. I just wanted to, um, let you know..."

"*Let me know what?"*

Shut up. Let me say it. "About the party—"

"*You're going, aren't you?"*

"I don't know."

"*What do you mean?"*

"I mean...I just don't think—"

"*Bryce's going to be there, right? Let us take care of everything. You just go and have a good time. We'll tap him until he's nice and dry."*

Kyna sighed. "I'm not feeling the moment, Natalie. Now's not the time—for me or for him."

"*Then...what? Are you saying you're not going to tap him tomorrow?"*

"I don't know."

"*Because if not, well, there are plenty of other people who'd like to have him for their own—"*

"No!" Kyna exclaimed, with a ferocity that surprised even herself. "I mean...it's my choice."

"*It should be Ash's. She found him first, after all."*

"She wouldn't know what to do with him."

A sigh on the other end of the line. "*I don't get you. You want to keep him all to yourself, yet you won't put him to any good use. Sounds kind of selfish to me."*

You should talk, thought Kyna. *I wonder if Anthony ever really* wants *to give up his* qi *at a moment's notice. You're a couple sharing out of necessity, but what if you didn't* need *to be with each other?*

Perhaps Natalie sensed her antipathy, as her next response was less aggressive. "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way, but, well, how will everyone else look at this? They'll see you at school with this blond bombshell of a stud, they'll expect something from you, and when weeks and months pass and they don't get it...

what'll they think, Kyna?"

"They can think whatever they want."

Silence. Natalie's inaudible exasperation. "*So what's it going to be?"*

Kyna thought for a moment. When her indecision refused to resolve itself, she said, "I don't know."

* * *

Anthony's party was at eight o'clock.

At a quarter till, Bryce found himself walking briskly along Lincoln. Freshly showered and impeccably groomed, he felt muddier than ever, in need of shedding an illusory skin that had been thickening over the past week.

There must be an ulcer the size of a poker chip growing inside my stomach, he thought, coming to an intersection, pressing the crosswalk button, fingering his wallet in his pants and imagining the twenty tucked away inside.

Twenty dollars for the week.

Needless to say, he wasn't going to bother showing up at the warehouse again on Monday. Not with Edward there, Edward and his holier-than-thou attitude, Edward and his ego.

The light turned green. Bryce bolted across the street, the sweet, oily exhaust of two dozen waiting vehicles filling his sinuses, clinging to his lungs and fusing with his afflicted soul.

Why am I out here, running around like this? he wondered—but he already knew the answer. *Because after spending an entire Saturday stuck in that house with Mom and Dad and that...that crumbling wall between all of us I'd rather take my chances out in this crazy town.*

In a way it was sort of exhilarating, to be out and about, directing his own course. He'd hardly even mentioned it to his parents; they thought he was merely bumming around the shopping square down the street when in actuality here he was, ascending into a patchwork of shingled vertexes and towering cypress. The homes here were nice, single-story houses with pristine lawns, geometrically-perfect hedges, and spotless driveways. As prejudiced as it might have sounded, Anthony didn't look like the sort of guy whose parents could afford to live in such a nice neighborhood.

The party was already underway when he arrived; Anthony greeted him at the front door.

"All right, you made it!" he said, patting Bryce on the shoulder and leading him into the living room. There were perhaps a dozen people of varying age, sex, and dress lounging on the sofa and on the floor, drinks in hand, faces beaming. Natalie was among them—

—Kyna was not.

A bit disappointed, Bryce made room for himself on the floor and exchanged greetings with everyone. He talked, told a few jokes, browsed the communal docked smartphone playlist, and played video games as more guests arrived. The

grand total was somewhere around thirty, mostly students from Savanna, faces that were somewhat familiar, but not enough that Bryce felt at home trying to keep up with stories and jokes that were about people he didn't know. He'd wanted to talk to Kyna, to hang out with her, get to know her; instead, he was adrift on a social sea, lost without a compass. It only got more uncomfortable when, at half past nine, all the lights were dimmed and the mood of the party became infinitely more sultry. People began pairing off for quality make-out time.

That explains the ratio of guys to girls, Bryce thought, silently excusing himself from a waning group of party goers who hadn't yet retired to some dark corner or vacated bedroom. Finding his way into the kitchen, he got himself a soda (there were a variety of alcoholic beverages available, but he'd already decided to hold off on getting drunk just in case Kyna still showed up) and walked from room to room, sipping and trying not to spoil anyone's vibe. He considered leaving early, but realized he'd left his shoes somewhere in the dimmed living room, which had turned into a miniature brothel.

He'd just discovered the sprawling backyard and accompanying swimming pool when he heard a familiar voice calling his name. He turned and saw Kyna standing just outside the sliding glass door he'd come through only moments before.

"Kyna!" Immediately his demeanor brightened, and something inside him loosened.

She smiled and came toward him, her wiry, utilitarian frame packaged casually in a denim jacket and charcoal leggings. It wasn't however, like it had been in algebra class. Though he was thrilled to see her, the fever of infatuation did not take him over. Rather, his appreciation for her now was a modest, steady flame burning amidst something much larger, much brighter.

They hugged politely.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to show," he said.

Kyna shrugged. "I had some business to take care of. I almost didn't come, but then I remembered that little puppy dog face you made when you were begging in Ms. Featley's class. I couldn't resist."

"I wasn't *begging*," he said with a grin.

"Sure you weren't."

They found a pair of lounge chairs at the far end of the yard and sat down. Someone had set up a boombox on one of the tables; The Civil Wars provided ambiance. Several other people were swimming and lounging about. In this hazy backyard world, lit from beneath by the pool floods and scored by "Poison & Wine," Bryce and Kyna talked. They spoke of school, of home, of hobbies, and of each other's opinions concerning the cafeteria menu at Savanna High. The brightest moments came whenever Bryce happened to say something funny and Kyna laughed inadvertently. It was a light, lilting sound that often seemed to catch her by surprise. Hard as she was, it was wonderful to see her smiles, to hear her laughter—to feel her tenderness. She was letting her guard down, he knew, for fun, for the sake of the moment—

—for him.

"You know," he said, sipping his third Coke of the evening, "you're a lot of fun to hang out with."

She snorted playfully. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You know the usual stereotypes. Most cute girls I've met are self-centered, conceited. Or else they only spent their time trying to look good for their boyfriends. No time for anyone else. Kind of a show-off thing. They look good, but they have nothing interesting to say."

"Oh, I'm used to that," Kyna said, leaning back in her chair and staring out at the pool. "People always think you're weird or strange if you dress a certain way or listen to certain kinds of music. And if you're seventeen and you don't have a boyfriend, don't drive a car, that means you're lost for all time."

Bryce blushed, recalling his initial tomboy-dyke impressions. He quickly filed them away in his mind. "That sucks. Why would anyone say that?"

"Don't know, don't care. It actually makes it easier to find out who your real friends are, because those are the ones who stick around, the ones who come to you because of *you* and not for all that material crap. Meanwhile, everyone else, they turn their backs on you and swap phony stories with their shallow friends." She paused for a moment, watching the water, her eyes glistening like pearls. "My, er, boyfriend was like that. He got with me because he thought I was a commodity—something cool to show off. But I think people like that become afraid of your boldness, your will to be yourself and to not just slink around with everybody else's trends. They want to control you before you control *them*, but they miss everything in between."

"Yeah...control," Bryce murmured. He crumbled his soda can. "Lots of people around here seem crazy over it." He thought of Edward and his mother, Edward the Snake, coiling himself around Julia, squeezing out all traces of her essence, emptying her soul and taking her body for his own purposes.

"Bryce?"

He sniffed, surprised to find himself on the verge of tears, his hands clenched into angry fists. Quickly he composed himself, wiping his cheek and looking up. "It's nothing."

"You were crying," Kyna said, gazing earnestly at him...waiting patiently.

Tell me, her expression said.

So he did, relating to her the experience of discovering that his mother had cheated on his father—or rather, that she'd been cajoled into the arms of a complete douchebag. "I wanted to beat the crap out of the guy, but, well, he's just like all the others who've toyed with me." He bit his lip; the pain was a moment's forced distraction from the memory of the movie theater incident, from his scandalous dreams—

"What is it?" asked Kyna, noticing his sudden scrutiny.

"Are you sure you weren't in my dreams?" he asked, half serious, half he-didn't-know-what. "I mean, I've seen some crazy things since moving here, stuff I couldn't imagine back in Texas. But here it seems to be the status quo or something."

She seemed to freeze for the slightest instant—pondering, considering, deciding something infinitely important—before smiling wanly and looking down at the concrete. "I think I'd know if I'd been in your dreams," she said softly.

Bryce sighed, missing another twinge of subtlety, tuning out a hint of something he didn't want to imagine—something that had to do with Kyna being the only predatory aspect of Anaheim to have actually invaded his most personal mental space.

"Geez, I'm sorry," he said. "There I go again, talking about crazy stuff." He paused, waiting for time to take the melancholy from Kyna's expression. When it didn't work, he suggested they talk about something else.

"Like what?" Kyna asked.

"Well...tell me about your family."

Kyna took a slow, deep breath, her eyes fixing on his, impenetrable irises flickering crystal-clear for just a moment. "My dad's a scuzz bucket. My mom can't deal with life. Nowadays she's hardly even alive. Just enough to go to work and earn money for booze and cigarettes. I have my own room outside the house because I can't stand to be around whenever *he* comes over."

Bryce thought she was joking at first, but when he saw the sobriety in her eyes, he knew immediately she'd revealed a sensitive portion of herself that perhaps no one else in the entire world had ever seen. Why? He couldn't fathom, but he knew it meant something—a test, perhaps. A wish. He found himself responding, not being turned off or disgusted, not looking away shyly and shrugging with an "oh, that sucks" expression, but holding her gaze and communicating silently that what she'd said was okay. That was her baggage; he wasn't going to run from it, wasn't going to find a cuter, more shallow girl who was as easy on the soul as she was on the eyes.

Not another Nikki.

Kyna's head tilted slightly, almost as if she'd been expecting him to take off running the instant she'd finished her mini-biography. This was either exactly what she wanted, or it was too much for her to handle; she closed her eyes momentarily, and when she opened them there were salty droplets coalescing her dark lashes.

"Why are you here?" she whispered.

The question didn't make any sense at first, but then everything came into focus, and he was able to pinpoint the confusion he'd sensed earlier. *She's wondering what's in it for me, what am I trying to take from her?* "I just...I want to spend time with you, I want to talk to you and tell jokes, and go to the mall and hang out together."

"Oh, come *on*!" Kyna exclaimed, angry, distressed—quivering like a leaf. "You're just saying that because...because..." She trailed off, looked toward the pool, where several partygoers were now watching the proceedings with growing concern. Biting her lip, obviously embarrassed by her own actions, she stood up to leave. "I'm sorry. I should go."

"Wait!" Bryce jumped to his feet, grabbed her hand. She turned and looked at him, failure and hope shifting across her face.

He said, “Let me find my shoes first.”

* * *

“We used to live at this RV park, me, my mom, and Dead Man. It was like a KOA, but for hippies and flower children. My mom moved there with him after she finished high school. I was born there, grew up there. We had this trailer and all day, all week, every month of the year it was this real free love, commune-with-nature kind of propaganda. I mean, come *on*. This wasn’t the seventies. Who in their right mind actually lives like that? But my mom probably thought it was a dream come true, out of the city, back to basics... I never told her what I thought of *him*...what he did with the other women when she wasn’t around. I didn’t know how, I guess, or I was too afraid to tell anyone because I didn’t want to cause trouble.

“This went on until I was thirteen. We were out here by then, and we were real outsiders. I saw other kids playing and going to school and Dead Man wouldn’t even let me and Mom out of the house. Only to school, or to the store. He said suburbia would corrupt us. So we stuck inside, hiding away from the big bad world. We ate the food, wore the clothes he brought us, and kept to ourselves.

“I didn’t talk to anyone, I didn’t make friends because I didn’t want them to come over and see how we lived. Then one day I decided I’d had enough. I finally stood up to Dead Man. I realized I had it in me to control myself instead of letting him control me. I knew then that he’d been beaten, but I had to watch myself, because now he really knew how much I hated him, and I think he likes that, to know he can manipulate a person’s emotions. My mom’s a pushover. She died inside a long time ago. That was her defense mechanism. But me, I’m harder to deal with, and he gets off on that.

“I started looking out for myself in every way. I refused to live in that house anymore. I started working out and all so that if it came down to it, I could hold my own in a fistfight. I made it clear that I wasn’t a part of it anymore, that I could take care of myself—and that’s what I did.”

Bryce shifted on the cool clubhouse floor, his mind processing, considering Kyna’s details. She’d taken him here directly from Anthony’s, cutting through darkened alleyways and untrimmed foliage until they’d emerged into her backyard, a murky arena of spidery branches, shimmering leaves, and gleaming garbage bags set alongside a rusted chain-link fence lost to overzealous undergrowth. She’d hesitated, ever so slightly, at the clubhouse entrance, as if opening the door to her home meant opening the door to her very soul. Now, half an hour later, he was sitting barefoot within her haven, listening to every long-lost secret that made Kyna Miller who she was.

“Not your dream-girl kind of story, huh?” she laughed nervously.

Bryce smiled reassuringly. “You didn’t die *inside*.”

“Still, I’m not what most guys go for. But I was never looking for a boyfriend anyway. Guys all want the same thing.”

"What would that be?"

She burst out laughing. Bryce might have been offended had he not become entirely addicted to the sound of her laughter.

Once she'd composed herself, she caught his stare. "Aren't we the innocent one? Okay, guys all want *two* things." She pointed at her chest and crotch.

Bryce shrugged, a blush developing, the implication settling in.

Kyna nodded and took his hand in her own. "But it's not like with everyone else. They just want what they want. For me...it has to be an agreement between two people. Each person is willing to share something with the other. Something special."

Her gaze absorbed Bryce. His spine tingled; he felt a twinge somewhere deep inside. "Yeah, too bad there aren't more people out there who are looking for that. I mean, I wish...I wish people cared more. I wish—"

A voice whispered inside his head:

Lonely no more.

"Lonely no more," he repeated.

To wake up the next morning and find your lover's still there.

"To wake up the next morning and find your lover's still there."

Knowing that you'll always be there, so you don't have to be afraid, don't have to be lonely anymore.

"Knowing that...that you'll always be there, so you don't have to be afraid, don't have to be lonely anymore."

Kiss me, Bryce...please.

He was overcome, reeling, cautionary circuits overloaded. The old Bryce Powell courting process was discarded, replaced by a new, simple need: to be with Kyna, to dissolve the anguish, to melt the pain. He leaned forward, and they kissed—politely at first, then, as they both became more confident, more intimately. After a moment, he pulled back, his nose touching hers, their breath intermingling.

"It's strange," he said. "I feel like I've known you all my life, like we've met before somewhere." He thought of his dreams, how perfectly he'd imagined her. He wondered if she was just as invigorating in real life.

He'd been gazing into her eyes the entire time, giving no indication as to the properties of his thoughts, but now she suddenly became opaque. Not outwardly —she still smiled, her hands were still holding his—but some hidden door had been closed; her eyes had shifted from emerald to slate.

"You're shivering," Bryce said. It was chilly inside the clubhouse, but he sensed her tremors had nothing to do with temperature. He found himself repeating that monumental question over and over inside his head: *Is it the right time?*

She must have sensed his thoughts, as she stiffened again.

Is it the right time?

He started to pull away. "I should be getting home."

"No, wait." Kyna held him tight. "Stay."

Please.

It hadn't been his intention, hadn't been his plan to get lucky with a girl he'd

only known for a week—but here he was, alone with her, holding her, on the verge, something buzzing inside his head, go or stay, fight or flight, safety or the unknown. He wanted something, he just didn't know what. Not necessarily sex, but...something.

Kyna seemed to share this yearning, as unsure as he was, but determined to make the attempt anyhow. She broke eye contact with him, pressed herself against him and whispered something unintelligible into the fabric of his shirt. Instantly, the storm cleared and the clouds parted, revealing the answer in crystal clarity.

"You..." he breathed, taking her by the shoulders, moving her to arm's length so that he could get a good look at her. "You're...you're one of them, aren't you? Just now, you...you were doing it. I felt you."

She sniffed, wiped a stream of tears from her cheek. "You saw me in your dreams. I saw you, too. I was there, I came to you because I...because I liked you, I thought you were cute. I-I never wanted to hurt you, but I was afraid. I mean, I'm not the kind of girl that most guys go for. I never had a boyfriend—I just said that because I was afraid. You were new and handsome, and I thought my only chance was to...to influence you. But you've been so kind to me. I couldn't go any further unless...unless I told you the truth."

Bryce was aghast. "So...this whole time?"

She nodded, miserable, apprehensive—awaiting his response.

There were no rules, no guidelines. Bryce was shocked, of course. He looked at Kyna, studied her as he did an inventory of his own emotions...and he found that even without her influence, he still wanted to be with her. She may have been amplifying his emotions, working his will (and lying to him in the process), but beneath it all he'd been the one initiating the attraction, as he was doing now—*unless she's still working me over...but no. Look at her. Feel how she's shaking all over. She's told me the truth because she cares, because I'm not just some guy.*

He took her in his arms and cuddled close, unsure of what to do next, scared of what could happen, but knowing there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Chapter 21

It was two in the morning when Anthony and Natalie, having escorted the last of the guests off the premises, met outside the house, beside the garbage bins. Awash in pale starlight, their eyes glimmered with a pleasant sort of tiredness—the satisfaction of having fed well—as they tossed their trash bags inside and then stood together.

"You suppose this is the last party for a while?" Anthony asked, letting the question out quickly, as if he'd been holding his breath since sundown.

"Depends on how well Kyna's making out with Bryce right now," Natalie replied. She gestured at Anthony's mouth. "Um, you've got some blood right there."

Anthony licked his lips. "You think she's still with him?"

A sigh from Natalie. "I don't know. I talked with her, told her that everyone has to face their fears, that there comes a time when everyone has to move on with their lives. It's been long enough since she dumped Josh. She can move on now."

Anthony watched Natalie for a reaction. "But suppose she can't go through with it?"

"Then we're on our own."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"Why'd you ask, then?"

"I don't know." Anthony looked toward the driveway, watched the crickets dance over the concrete. He looked down at his hands. "She just seems...*thin* lately. We've been with her for a while now. She's taken such good care of us. I don't even remember what the old me looks like."

Natalie shot him a curious glance. "Really? What about at night, before bed? Don't you let yourself unwind?"

"Yeah, but I do it after all the lights are out, so I won't see myself. Sometimes I'll catch a shadow here or there, but not enough to keep me tossing and turning thinking about it."

"Oh."

A shared thought passed between them, igniting itself amidst the embers of nervous energy, acquired essence, and cumulative uneasiness.

"We should go inside and finish cleaning up," Natalie said after a moment.

Anthony nodded and followed her back into the house, though he didn't stay on task for long. Upon passing the first mirror (this one in the front hallway), he stopped and stared, taking in his reflection between columns of shadow projected by the blinds of a nearby window.

"Now you've got me thinking," he whispered, a devious gleam in his eye.

"Wait," said Natalie, stepping beside him and taking his hand. "Me, too."

"Are you sure—"

"Yes."

They stood together, and, like fresh paintings left in the rain by a disgruntled artist, their bodies began to shift and squirm. Flesh rearranged itself, bones condensed—two painted shells dissolved to reveal the pair of diminutive creatures housed within: skinny Natalie, with her stringy hair, flat chest, narrow hips, and knobby legs; lanky Anthony, without his broad shoulders and athletic frame.

The two of them now sickly, now homely.

Anthony moved toward the mirror. His reflection showed a mask of eyebrows and teeth, barely recognizable—yet it was him. His clothes just weren't fitting right anymore. The T-shirt that had once been stretched taught across his chest now hung limply from jagged skin-and-bone shoulders.

"I look like a mummy," he croaked, poking his Adam's Apple with one knobby finger. "Even my voice is all messed up."

Natalie didn't respond, for she was now engrossed in her own reflection: a long-lost girl from four years ago, a shadowy imprint of the person she used to be, her once-proud African visage now pale and emaciated.

"I used to be anemic," she said, softly, touching her face with her hand. "My mom didn't have insurance. We couldn't afford a doctor, so I remember she kept getting me all these healthy foods at the store. She told me we were going to beat it through diet and prayer...but it just didn't work. I *wanted* to feel better, but I couldn't, and so I got sicker, and when I thought I was lower than I could ever get, I met Kyna."

Anthony laughed nervously. "You know, I bet she doesn't need to do this. That's why she's stronger than us. She can go forever without having to revert. Not that she's ever had it as bad as we did."

"Maybe she *does* revert. No one would know, she's so secretive. I know that for us it was genetics. For her it was family."

A pause, then, as both youths pondered different thoughts along a similar thread.

"We could go back to finding people at school or in the park or wherever," Anthony said. "It's not too hard anymore, now that we know how to do it. Heck, I hear Josh even recycles himself to keep going for as long as possible between taps. If someone like him can survive..."

Natalie scowled. "He's a walking harlequin. No, you and I both know this is as good as it's going to get. We've just got to keep Kyna on track, for her as much as for us."

"So what about her and Bryce? Is she going to follow through?"

"She took him home, I think. I saw them leave together."

"And you think she's, um, working him over? Tapping him for real this time?"

"I know Kyna. I have to believe that no matter how much of an act she puts on, she knows what she's doing. She's not being taken in by Bryce or anyone else. If

she's pretending to be a lovesick girl, all frail and scared out of her wits, well, she's just pretending. You're not a proper initiate anyway unless you know how to *act*, unless you know how to really work the people you tap. She knows how to play naïve duds like Bryce because guys like that really believe they're doing a girl a favor by spending the night with them. That's how you get close enough to them that they'll give you anything you want: love, affection, blood. It's the oldest trick in the book, with the sweetest payoff."

A sigh from Anthony. "I hope so."

Chapter 22

Noon, thought Kyna. *Noon, on a Sunday, and I'm still in bed. I must be losing my mind.*

Beside her, Bryce stirred and mumbled something in his sleep. His face was hidden behind a tangle of blond locks; she could feel him pressed against her, warm and reassuring, and it unleashed a flood of memories from the early morning.

Clumsy, inept at first—not like in the dreams, but willing to work his butt off, willing to learn.

Now here he was, satisfied and resting; sleeping after a successful performance.

Josh had looked like that after our first time: so angelic, so peaceful, not a trace of animosity about him. Impeccable liar...but no, don't think about that right now.

Kyna made a mental account of what had happened during those precious hours of the morning when she'd coaxed Bryce into a lengthy, heartfelt discussion that had taken the two of them halfway to dawn. Heartfelt, but not entirely true, as evidenced by her explanation of the "special" abilities she possessed:

"Dead Man never touched me. I was too young, I guess, but it was still a pretty twisted way to live. He had some kind of control fetish, and it had taken over our lives. One day I just got so tired of it—something inside me snapped. I can't explain it, exactly, but I know it's something he was using, some kind of power he had over us. When I knew that, I could defend myself. I realized it was just a kind of warmth, an energy—if I directed it, if I focused it, I could affect things. I practiced for years, and when I was thirteen, I let him have it—and he never had control over me again."

"Awesome," Bryce had said, eyes wide with wonder.

So impressionable, Kyna thought, back in the present. *Making me feel bad about telling a lie—as if he already knew the truth and was secretly trying to get me to confess how my knack* really *came to me one morning: an itch, an ache, a hunger—an indiscriminate pathogen inflicted upon me by Dead Man's hand, making me sick, almost killing me. He* did *touch me, but it had nothing to do with sex. It was far worse.*

She recalled how she'd been stricken with the telltale fever, the gradual wasting away in bed, becoming too weak to move a finger or toe, even. Death was a certainty—almost welcome—until Dead Man had revealed to her the terrible secret elixir in a fit of uncontrollable hunger.

That's right, Kyna thought, biting her lip, straining to hold back a sudden barrage of tears. *He tapped me, cut me wide open, fed from me like some kind of ravenous animal. He whispered meaningless encouragements into my ear as he*

carved me up. So painful at first, and worse afterward—worse when I got sick, when I was too weak to resist his "cure," worse when I actually felt better *letting him share with me...worst when I realized his sick, twisted energy was revitalizing me. No more fever, no more headache, no more rotting from the inside out. The poison was passed on to me, as was the antidote.*

Now it's the same for Bryce.

She could, at the very least, take comfort in the fact that he didn't have to learn about it the way she had. Ash had already bitten him and transmitted the disease that way. Bryce was already infected, and was lucky enough to have been born with good blood. He was a carrier, a reservoir.

He would never know the worst of what was now flowing through his veins.

Now, at noon on a Sunday, here she was, lying in bed with pure, sweet, one-in-a-million Bryce Powell. Here she was sucking in the smell of his hair and skin and breath filling the suddenly-constricting space within the clubhouse that had once been her most private sanctuary. Here she was, emotionally satiated, filled to the brim with terrifying happiness stolen during a self-inflicted invasion led by a boy she'd only known for a week—

Oh my God.

She wanted to scream, to jump from the bed and run out into daylight, into reality, into—what? *Where do you want to run to? Same old life, in here and out there. Same old world. Even if you'd refused to go through with this, you'd still need to get your fix somewhere. You'd still need to hurt someone. Now it's just one person: Bryce. And you don't have to hurt him. You have him primed—he's yours for the tapping as long as you want. You can make it work.*

"What are you thinking about?"

Kyna blinked, realized she'd been staring so intently into space that she hadn't noticed Bryce's waking. Immediately, she dismissed the mental chorus that had been encroaching upon her sanity, and went from overcast to sunny in a handful of milliseconds.

"You snore too loud," she said, smiling, stretching, nudging his cheek, all in one deft movement.

Bryce scowled. "Nah-ah."

He pinched her delicately and they rolled together on the bed, laughing, tickling, playfully swatting each other with pillows.

Good, all the things lovers do, she thought, dodging a blow, *but are we really lovers, or is this the best damned performance I've ever given?*

She almost felt guilty—guilty of stealing something from an innocent, even though it had been *Bryce's* wish to come here, *Bryce's* wish to complete what she'd started. He wanted her, that much she could sense. Maybe, even, he loved her—but all she knew how to control was the baseline connection between them; love was otherwise left to chance.

It had been on her mind all night. She hadn't even wanted to show up at Anthony's party, and had been on the verge of relinquishing her burgeoning connections to Bryce as they'd sat together beside the swimming pool—yet he'd

sought her out anyway, and she couldn't entirely hate that. After all, beneath her rugged tomboy exterior was the frenzied desire: to be *loved* by someone who wasn't Dead Man, someone who wasn't merely out for the convenience of her *qi*. Bryce had slept with her, and in doing so had sealed off a back door that she'd been unable to close for the last four years of her life.

Dead Man can't touch me now, she thought as the pillow fight ended and she fell into Bryce's strong arms. *Can't touch me because I've given myself to someone else.*

She kissed Bryce on the nose. He seemed content simply holding her, cuddling her, taking her in with eyes alone.

Because I'm directing him...no, it's more than that. I don't even feel him pulling at me at all. He's just...himself.

So easy.

"Come here," she said, pulling him from the bed. "I want to show you something."

Bryce reached for his jeans.

"Don't worry about that. We're not going anywhere." She sat on the floor, legs splayed, and patted the space in front of her. "Lie down here, with me."

Bryce seemed to consider her invitation momentarily, then moved onto the floor.

She instructed him to lie down on his back with his head resting in her lap.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"We're going to begin your lessons."

"Lessons?"

"Mm-hm."

"What kind of lessons?"

She smoothed his hair with her hands. "Brainwork. How to be more assertive, how to have more control over your environment. You've already seen people with the knack. People like Cal, Ash, Edward—anyone who's ever made you do something you didn't want to do. They have control over you because they pay close attention to their willpower. Once you learn to tame your own, well, then you're free. You can level the playing field."

Bryce shifted. "Well, I don't want to *hurt* anyone."

Oh, but you do, Kyna thought, feeling the sudden tension in his shoulders. *You're thinking about Edward, thinking about what you'd like to do to him right now, how you'd like to repay him for what he did to your mom. And then there was me, in Josh's body...you hate that even more, don't you? Well, just be glad it wasn't really Josh, because when he feeds...*

"Don't think of it in the offensive, then," she said. "Think of it as an adjustment. Sooner or later, everyone around here has to choose their side of the tracks. Find a way to fit in or else stay a dud. The first step is to get used to moving outside your body."

"Um, sure," Bryce laughed. "I'll just *do* that."

"Shh," she said, gently stroking his hair, his forehead, his cheek. "That's why

we're practicing."

* * *

It was unlike anything Bryce had ever experienced. Even the thrill of losing his virginity to Kyna couldn't have prepared him for *this*. He lay still, the cool concrete beneath his bare body, his head resting in Kyna's lap as she whispered soothing words—a modern day magic spell designed to lull him into a sort of trance. As she spoke, Bryce's flesh obeyed, his mind acquiesced. He felt a pleasant warmth filling him.

He was also completely paralyzed.

Alarmed, he tried to sit up, but he was stuck—sort of. He could feel his arms moving, his abdominals clenching as he tried to sit up, but all he saw was the roof of the clubhouse beyond Kyna's now-vague form. It was as if he were occupying two bodies simultaneously: one comprised of flesh and bone, the other fabricated out of thin air.

Kyna, he gasped, voiceless. *I can't—what's happening to me?*

Her gentle presence found him—only now she spoke without words:

It's okay. I'm here. Relax and think of the inside of the clubhouse. I'm going to teach you how to twist out. You're sort of still stuck in your body, from the waist down, right? Well, to break free you have to twist out of your body, counterclockwise.

He relaxed somewhat, considering. *Twist?*

It sounds funny, I know, but you have to kind of sit up slightly and rock to one side. Just picture yourself as a giant screw and imagine spinning counterclockwise as fast and as hard as you can.

If you say so, he said, clenching up illusory muscles, leaning to one side, then the other, as he prepared to exit into the unknown. With perhaps a little too much enthusiasm, he started to twist out—and very suddenly found himself spinning out of control as he left his body behind and, well, filled the room. For a moment he felt as if he might explode through the very walls and shoot off into a million different directions, but Kyna was there beside him, a vivid (if immaterial) guiding light.

Whoa there, she giggled, surrounding him, reeling him back in. *One step at a time. Plenty of time to work on your acrobatics later.*

Of course, without their bodies as a reference point, their conversation was an implied one, made up of instantaneous thoughts unhindered by the speed of the human brain. Still, Bryce could imagine Kyna holding him, smiling comfortingly as she calmed him down, helped him to maintain his focus.

The most important step to master is getting in and out of your body. Influencing someone or something has nothing to do with magic; it's all about stepping back out of the material world for a moment, receding where time can't be measured. Here you can do things in a fraction of the "time" it would take you if you were still in your material body.

And where is here? Bryce asked.

This is everything—the world, the universe, the basis for the knack that everyone has. Control yourself, and you can control everything else. People, objects—you name it.

Bryce turned giddy, focusing his attention on the clubhouse and realizing that all he had to do was think about an item or a point of interest and suddenly he was there, able to see it without seeing, able to touch without touching. *Cool. Where do we start?*

We've already started. Now, the next step is to get back into your body and "wake up." Think of your body, picture yourself hovering near your feet. That's how you get in: through your feet, spinning clockwise. It's easier than getting out. You can just let your body absorb you. It's kind of an automatic thing. Just relax and stop thinking, let your mind wander now and you'll get pulled back inside.

He couldn't help but feel a sort of a voyeuristic thrill, seeing his physical self from the outside like this. He positioned himself according to Kyna's instructions —though it was a little harder than he'd thought to complete the transition; he was now back inside his body, but he was still paralyzed.

He felt Kyna giggle, saw her hand reaching toward his belly button, tickling him—

—and he woke up, jolting slightly, feeling the suddenly-hard floor beneath him, the firm warmth of Kyna's legs splayed on either side.

"See?" she cooed. "Not so tricky after all."

Bryce could only gasp and work his arms like an infant discovering his limbs for the first time. Indeed, he *felt* infantile, now that he'd been given a glimpse of how things really worked in the mind-body departments.

"That was amazing," he said, starting to sit up.

Kyna held him down. "It gets better, but you have to practice."

"Um, okay."

For what felt like hours—days and months, even—Bryce lay with Kyna in the clubhouse. She trained him to step in and out of his flesh until transcending was as easy as changing clothes. Then, when he was ready, she took him out for a ride.

It wasn't really sightseeing, because he couldn't *see* anything. Nevertheless, Kyna and himself traveled throughout Anaheim, and he felt the city beneath him in the aching textures of sunbaked roofs, the myriad colors of palm and sycamore, the gridlocked lines of smelly cars threaded along relentless highways separating stifling ghettos from sprawling manors.

I didn't know you could feel sound, he said, shuddering at the call of a jaybird as they passed through a park. *I mean...damn. Where did you learn to do all this?*

Dead Man knew some things, Kyna replied. *My mom had books, too—stuff that's just an overpriced gimmick to most people, I guess, but I could actually use the astrology. If a book says to meditate, your average Joe just sits in a lotus position and gets quiet for awhile. If people like us meditate, we can actually leave our bodies. All these spiritual gurus probably have the right idea, but it's only the initiates who have the right energy to use any of it.*

Bryce was elated. *I had no idea!*

Not many people do. Now you see how it's possible to have such an advantage. Soon you'll be able to do this all by yourself, and you'll know true freedom.

Shortly thereafter, Kyna led him back to the clubhouse, where he awoke in his body.

Rubbing his eyes and blinking, he fully expected it to be midnight, weeks after he'd gone to sleep. However, quite to his amazement, it was only afternoon.

"Still Sunday?" he asked, stretching and getting to his feet.

"Out of body, out of time," replied Kyna. She stood, walked over to the bed. "Haven't you ever had a dream that seemed to last for days? Same thing."

Bryce shook his head. "Radical."

In response, Kyna wadded up his shirt and tossed it at his face.

Chapter 23

Bryce turned—no, *glided*—into Belinda Circle. It was still the afternoon following his first lay, and he navigated the concrete oasis with all the confidence of a sassy runway model, lighter than air, impervious to everything but a well-executed lightning strike.

That was why, as he let himself into his parents' house, he was quite unprepared to find Daniel and Julia waiting for him, faces downcast. They were sitting together in the living room, caught in the middle of some heavy discussion when, as he closed the door behind him, they quickly fell silent and fixed him with a pair of sobering looks. Immediately he was brought back down to Earth by the remembrance of such things as rules, curfews, and impending punishments—especially since he'd stepped out unannounced on a Saturday evening and hadn't returned until Sunday afternoon, no phone call, no text.

That's right, he thought, biting his lip and moving further into the living room, edging his way toward the staircase. *Still only seventeen years old, still going to get my butt kicked for disappearing overnight.*

To make matters worse, there were already tears—some dried, some fresh—on Julia's face.

She's told Dad—she's told him everything, and worse yet, he thinks it's her fault, she thinks it's her own fault. Neither of them knows the truth and...goddamnit, I hate Edward.

Daniel cleared his throat, got out of his seat. "Where've you been?"

Bryce dropped his gaze to the floor. He scrutinized his shoes, the laminate—anything to resist The Look his father so desperately needed to give him. *Because he's in shock, maybe on the verge of crying, but he has to hold it in because he's my dad, because he's a guy and that's what we do: hold all our feelings in until they burrow oozing holes through the walls of our stomachs. Better than the other pain he's probably feeling whenever he imagines Mom and Edward together.*

"I was...out," he said at last, clearing his throat.

Daniel's voice was terrifyingly calm. "I don't recall getting a head's up from you beforehand. Needless to say, your mother was worried sick—though we didn't bother calling the police this time since, well, there have been certain transgressions committed on your behalf as of late. It seemed pointless to once again draw attention to the apparent dysfunctional nature of our family."

Bryce kept his gaze subdued. He could hear Julia crying. She'd undoubtedly caught Daniel's double-entendre.

"Upstairs, now," Daniel said, quietly.

"Yes, sir," Bryce replied. He headed for the staircase, started up. Each step increased his dread exponentially. When he reached his room, Daniel ushered him inside and closed the door.

"Sit."

Bryce took a seat at the edge of his bed.

Daniel remained standing, and he started pacing as he ran his hands through his hair, rubbed his temples. "We've been over this before, so I'm not going to do a repeat. You need attention, your mother needs attention—I know that. I'm just one man. I'm doing my best to keep us in a nice house, with nice things, clothes, food in the fridge. I moved us here, took it up the rear from the company because that's what I've got. If that means I'm not around as much as I'd like to be, well, it doesn't mean we're not a family anymore. It doesn't mean we don't stick together, one part picking up the slack for the other when things get stretched a little thin. It certainly doesn't mean my son's prowling around town at all hours of the night getting himself into trouble."

"I wasn't getting into trouble," Bryce said, softly.

Daniel stopped pacing. "Where were you?"

"At...a friend's."

"Which friend?"

"Someone I met at school."

"Please, indulge my journalistic sense."

Bryce paused ever so slightly, processing his options, deciding at last that forthrightness might actually speed things up. He sighed and said, "I was with a girl."

Silence from Daniel.

Ah, that's right, Dad, Bryce thought. *Sex. The monkey wrench in the engine, the one item of father-son business we never really got out of the way, when it mattered. Wasn't a "good time" to talk about it back then, and now it's just as awkward. Maybe even worse, because I'm almost an adult and still we're overdue for a heart-to-heart. But that's not our style, is it? I was always the kid who had to figure out things on his own, from the half-assed textbook diagrams in school, from porn—from curious girls more interested in telling stories to their friends than in actually being with me.*

Daniel sighed, frustration crinkling his brow. There was a look in his eye, a loss for words, a recognition of the fact that Bryce was no longer his. Oh, certainly he was still the man's son, but he now belonged to someone else as well.

Because Kyna's shown me more respect than anyone in this twisted city. She opened herself to me, made up for years of you and Mom dancing around all the mushy stuff, never really getting into it at all. It's no wonder I spent the night someplace else.

There was nothing left to say. Daniel looked flustered for a moment, then headed for the door without even a token, "You make any babies, you take care of them" speech.

"I've got errands to run," he said. "We can talk about this later. Until then,

you're grounded."

"Yes, sir."

It was an unuttered agreement. Bryce remained in his room for the remainder of the day, didn't dare go downstairs—not even for dinner (though he did sneak a quick shower after a couple of rounds with his weights). As expected, Daniel never made an encore appearance. Julia's supposed infidelity, coupled with the knowledge that his son was now a man of the world...well, those were a pair of nasties sprung unwittingly from a Pandora's box that Daniel would undoubtedly be quarantining behind another of his mental walls during the coming weeks and months.

At some point during the evening, when Bryce was dozing, Kyna called to him mentally:

Hey, Bryce.

The communique made him twitch slightly. He was familiar with her voice, familiar with the "sound" of her essence resonating inside his head, but he was still unused to the feel of such voiceless conversation. "Kyna—"

Use your mind, not your mouth.

He became quiet. *Oh, right. I guess it would sound pretty strange if my parents heard me talking to myself.*

Kyna giggled. The vibration tickled him. *Are they close by?*

No. I'm in my bedroom. Bryce rolled onto his side, resting his hand on the empty blanket, imagining Kyna there, smiling back at him. *I was grounded for staying out overnight.*

Aw, it's not so bad. We'll see each other tomorrow morning.

Yeah, but it's going to be forever until then, and being here means I have to think about my family and the figurative walls we've built between ourselves. We've got... problems.

What problems?

Well, you know.

Edward.

Well, yeah. He's the big one on my mind, but there's a lot of other stuff that I never really noticed until recently.

Like what?

Bryce shrugged subconsciously. *I don't know. Stuff that's been on my mind for a couple of years now. I just never thought too much about it until we moved here. I mean, all my life, I guess, I've been sort of an in-house resident. I'm not adopted or anything, but I get the feeling we're all tolerating each other until I'm eighteen, and then...I don't know. I used to wonder when I was younger why my mom and dad never hugged or kissed me. If I ever had nightmares, I had to tough it out on my own. They never got all crazy with me after Little League games or at swim meets. I gave all that up after junior high because I figured if I couldn't impress my parents, then there was no reason to do it at all.*

And now, after what had happened between Edward and Julia, the likelihood that his parents were staying together solely for the purpose of getting their son

through high school increased tenfold.

Kyna's mood deepened. *At least you have a father. That's more of a chance than some of us get.*

Oh...yeah. Bryce checked himself. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to unload all my problems like that.*

Another pause from Kyna, who rippled ever so slightly in his mind. She seemed on the verge of mentioning something immensely important, but instead said, *Hey, don't sweat it. You know my problems, and you also know I don't let them fester. I work them out. So, how about this: Tonight, maybe around midnight, you and I go and teach Edward a lesson.*

Bryce sat up, his hand instinctively going up toward his ear, as if he were talking on his cell phone. *A lesson? What're you talking about?*

He messed with your family, so why can't we mess with him?

Tempting. He's an asshole, sure, but I don't know if I'd want to do anything like that.

I haven't even told you what we'll be doing.

Well, I mean I just don't think a jerk like him is worth the trouble. What if we get caught over there? What if he calls the police?

Dork, we wouldn't be there at all.

Suddenly he caught her drift. *You mean...?*

Yup. What better way to continue your training than out in the field?

It was an offer he couldn't refuse: to infiltrate the infiltrator, to catch the jackal off-guard, as it were. *Just like he did to me...just like he did to Mom.*

You know it. You said you're in your room, right? Lock the door before you go to bed. I'll come for you.

* * *

He woke in a dream to find Kyna (fully dressed this time) standing beside his bed, her hand tousling his hair. He started to sit up, but she restrained him gently.

"Easy," she said. "This isn't going to be as simple as the other dreams. Instead of just us, it'll be you, me, and Edward. Just relax for a little bit. Let yourself come into this state more fully."

Bryce complied, resting his head against the pillow. Looking up at Kyna, he could see she was mumbling something under her breath. He was inclined to ask her what it was, but then another thought popped into his mind:

"Kyna?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"What did you mean when you said I'd feel 'the hunger?'"

Crimson lips froze in mid-sentence, crystalline eyes went opaque. "When did I say that?"

"In one of our dreams. You left the bed after we were, uh, together. You came back with a knife and you slit your wrist." Bryce looked at the window for a moment, remembered how Kyna had been standing there, the toes of one foot

curled and tense, tapping against the floor beams.

Nervous.

He wondered if she was just as tense now. For a moment he was afraid that he'd touched on something untouchable.

"I was hopeful, I guess," she said. "I mean...I wanted you to feel the same thing I did, and I wanted to share with you what you shared with me. There isn't anything I can think of that's more potent than a person's essence. It's all mental, anyway. No big deal."

His question still relatively unanswered, Bryce nevertheless found himself satisfied (at least for now) as his senses began to sharpen and his attention was caught on other things. He noted that the details of his room, as viewed via this dream-realm, seemed cleaner and more ultra-silent than usual.

"So, what exactly are we doing?" he asked after a moment.

Kyna took a deep breath. "Well, you're going to get up now and put some clothes on."

"But if this is only a dream," he said, getting out of bed and picking his jeans up off the floor, "why do I need to get dressed?"

"Because it's good practice. In dreams, you're still linked to your body. You're still using it for reference, so naturally your brain is still handling most of the details. You tend to default to the bare necessities. You look at yourself now and you have blond hair, blue eyes, and all that, but really you're nothing more than pure thought. Trying to keep dressed, to keep yourself *organized*, as silly as it seems, is a really good way of practicing control. Control your dreams and it's easier to control your real life. It's a gradual process."

Bryce nodded, dressing himself and then standing proudly, hands on hips. "Okay. Done. What's next?"

Kyna giggled and nodded toward his lower half. "Try again."

Bryce looked down and found, with a fair amount of trepidation, that he was back in his underwear. Oddly enough, his shoes had remained intact.

There was time for practice, and so that was what he did. Sometimes he found himself wearing pants and no shirt, other times he was clad in everything but shoes. Eventually, after a dozen or so attempts (and after a rather embarrassing barrage of Kyna's laughter), he managed to keep things where they belonged.

"Good," said Kyna, nodding. "Let's go."

He followed her out of the bedroom, through the hallway, down the stairs and to the front door. Together they slipped out into the night, Kyna in the lead, and once again Bryce was mesmerized by the stark beauty of the surrounding mindscape: myriad stars, speckling the sky above; buzzing insects fluttering between lamplight and darkness; sounds of the neighbors' breathing or snoring, normally too faint to hear, now magnified to crystal clarity. It wasn't as powerful as what he'd experienced in Kyna's clubhouse, but it was potent nonetheless. (In actuality, it had been like this during his previous mental outing—he'd just been too preoccupied with the novelty to notice.)

"How are we supposed to find Edward's place?" he asked as they jogged lightly

down Lincoln.

"Focus on him," Kyna replied. "Feel him, find his scent. You'll just sort of know which direction to go."

"*Real* scientific."

"Shut up and concentrate."

Bryce laughed, feeling charged with an unnameable energy. He pictured Edward, focused intently on all the imagery of the man he'd collected over the last week, and soon he found himself thinking of Pacific Grove.

"It feels like he's that way," he said, nodding in a southwesterly direction.

"Cool."

Kyna kept the lead, taking his directions. Soon they were passing through a familiar part of town where the houses were nice and the streets were freshly-paved. They came to the recreational center, and Edward's "scent" became stronger.

"Dork," she whispered as they passed from foliage to pavement. "Keep focused."

"But I am," Bryce said, snorting playfully—and almost choking when he noticed his clothes had disappeared again. His hands went instinctively to his groin and he glared nervously up and down the empty street, which was a residential, but still—

Kyna sighed. "As much as I like seeing you this way, we're not here to fool around." She snapped her fingers and instantly he regained his modesty. "Don't get used to the favor. Now...which house?"

Bryce thought for a moment, imagined a compass needle suddenly prickling at attention, pointing to a two-story townhouse. He pointed. "That one. I'm pretty sure he's alone."

They bolted across the street. When they reached the front yard they crouched behind an enclosure of hedges and slipped silently up against the front of the house until they arrived at a spot beneath one of the darkened windows. Bryce squatted beside Kyna, his mind-body warm, almost tingling with anticipation.

"Bry," she hissed, nudging him with her elbow. "Your feet."

He looked down to find he was barefoot, his toes sinking into the moist soil. With a helpless shrug he summoned his shoes and then looked at Kyna, who put her finger to her lips and slid the window open. She beckoned for him to follow as she crawled inside, and, as he followed suit, he found himself wondering why stealth was required when neither of them was actually physically present. His best guess was that somehow it had to do with his training, keeping disciplined mentally, and so forth. After all, whoever heard of a clumsy apparition?

The ground floor of the house was silent and swathed in shadow. After some meticulous shuffling about, they found the staircase, which led to the second floor. The upstairs hallway split into two directions: one leading to the bathroom, the other to Edward's bedroom.

Single, Bryce thought as they crept along the hallway, their formless feet hardly touching the floor. *Makes sense. Assholes like this don't look for a family in the women they screw.*

Sure enough, when they entered the bedroom, he saw Edward sleeping alone on an extravagant water bed. There was just enough light being cast from the digital alarm clock on the bedside table so that his tranquil face was illuminated by a soft neon glow.

Bryce wanted to wring the man's neck.

Kyna walked over to the bed and spent a moment encompassing Edward's essence within her own, resizing the cloak of her consciousness so that she now hosted his soul as well as Bryce's. The change was evident almost immediately, and Bryce (despite being rather limited in this instance) sensed his own awareness increasing as he and Kyna became more *inside* the room.

He hates horror movies, Bryce thought, suddenly. *When he was a kid, he used to have nightmares about monsters, so his dad made him watch horror movies to toughen him up.* He gasped as, quite amazingly, Kyna's bodily image morphed from teenage girl into ancient-looking swamp creature clad in tangles of slimy roots.

Would something like this do? she asked silently, spreading her scaly arms.

Bryce nodded in wonderment.

Kyna leaned over Edward's sleeping form. "Edward," she whispered.

Instantly Edward jolted awake, unprepared for the sound of someone's voice, unprepared for the presence of a hideous imaginary monster invading his bedroom.

"What the hell?" he gasped, recoiling against the pillows. He looked disgruntled as his eyes desperately blinked away sleep, but Bryce knew that deep down inside he was utterly terrified—and that although Edward had the body of an adult, his mind had reverted to that ten-year-old boy state that allowed all the ghosts from his past to come rushing at him from the shadows. He screamed, trying to move out of the way as Kyna pounced, pinning him down with the weight of her newly-grotesque frame.

"How much have you taken?" she growled, wrestling with him, overpowering him.

Edward didn't understand the question. He hardly understood any part of what was going on. Bryce didn't get it either, but he felt the urgency, the hatred mirroring his own, and he realized there was a bond between himself and Kyna. He was feeling what she was feeling, and although his viewpoint remained separate from hers, he could still sense a part of himself occupying the same space as she. He also realized they'd never really discussed a plan during tonight's excursion; they were playing it beat by beat, and right now Kyna was following her own rhythm, something dark and sinister wrenching itself from within.

"Let's see," she said bitterly, taking hold of Edward's head and using her thumbs to pull his eyelids back. "Let's see how many lives you've ruined."

Bryce reeled backward, unprepared for the barrage of stolen imagery that was now coursing through his mind. There were memories flowing, random faces caught in various freeze-frames of ill-begotten passion: a half-naked waitress out behind an Italian restaurant crying out in ecstasy and agony when Edward's blade sliced into her neck at the crucial moment; a comely office intern sobbing against

Edward's desktop as he ravaged her unforgivingly from behind; Julia—

—Mom in the tool shed, head thrown back, eyes glazed over, looking like a rag doll clinging to Edward as he goes to town. Not wanting *to give herself;* having *to. He's not taking blood in this particular instance, but he's still* taking.

There were at least a hundred more images to contemplate, but none as potent as this one. Bryce crumpled himself against the wall, slid down into a squatting position with his knees clasped tightly against his chest. He was screaming through Kyna's lips, punching and scratching and tearing with her powerful monster's claws—acting out and observing the same terrible scene from two separate viewpoints.

"I hate you! I hate you! *I hate you!*" she screamed, digging her fingers into the flesh of Edward's neck, cutting off his breath as she exposed his jugular. She sliced open the engorged vein and let the spray fill her mouth. Bryce tasted it, too, and he was filled with a terrible ache, a fever pitch of energy now coursing through him, becoming more pronounced with each of Kyna's delirious gulps. He felt Edward's life force—the energy that had led him here in the first place—begin to recede rapidly into a darkness more encompassing than the deepest midnight, and he was elated, triumphant—terrified.

"Kyna," he called out, staggering to his feet, attention flitting back and forth between multiple channels. *A terrible man, yes,* he thought, *but not a killer.* "He's dying. You're...you're killing him."

She didn't seem to hear him. She was too immersed in the act to pull back now, and it became evident she was out for something else altogether, something that was entirely of her own design.

Can't wake up.

Edward gasped feebly as his soul emptied itself into the pit of Kyna's stomach. He sounded like a broken accordion. The energy was peeling off of him now, leaving him hollowed-out—yet his body was still functioning somehow. He pounded against Kyna; she pounded back.

Too much...too much!

"Kyna!" Bryce shrieked suddenly, stumbling. He gasped, soul spilling into open air, clutching the edge of the bed with trembling hands. "Kyna, stop!"

She ignored him, clenched her mind tight and shut him out completely as she finished her work, essence fusing in a confused cacophony of dying breaths and sweat-soaked blankets constricting his limbs flailing uncontrollably in time with the most deafening ring—

—his alarm clock went off.

It was Monday morning.

Chapter 24

Stepping between ruptured Hefty bags and patches of mutant crabgrass, Natalie nervously weaved her way through the muck comprising Kyna's backyard. When she stood in front of the clubhouse, she hesitated momentarily, undecided between knocking or turning away and forgetting the whole thing. This was, after all, Kyna's territory, an almost-secret domain tucked away in the back-alley lawns and dumpsters of the ghetto.

Even friends, though not completely unappreciated, were not welcome.

Natalie listened. She heard the sound of heavy breathing emanating from within the clubhouse, the sound of metal weights clanging—Kyna's morning workout, she realized with relief. Then again, what did she expect to find by coming here? What did she *want* to find? Kyna and Bryce, still in bed together, proof of their consummation? A note posted on the clubhouse door reading, "Success! You may pick up your *qi* at noon!"? Or maybe just a hint, a clue as to why Natalie had heard absolutely nothing from her supposed best friend since Saturday evening, when Kyna had left the party arm in arm with the cutest dud to cross her path since, well, Joshua.

Kyna should have shared and she knew it.

Natalie took a deep breath and rapped lightly on the door. The noises from within abruptly stopped.

After a moment of utter silence, Natalie cleared her throat and called out: "Kyna, it's me."

Silence—followed by a sudden *click!* as the clubhouse door slid open. Kyna, hair matted, skin slick with sweat, stepped out into the burgeoning morning light.

"Yeah?" she breathed.

"Good morning," Natalie said, trying to smile, but succeeding only in baring her teeth. "I was just...I didn't hear from you yesterday, so I thought...I thought I would, um, check in on things."

Kyna wiped her brow with the back of her arm. She looked a bit offset, but not annoyed—yet. "Well, I'm fine."

Of course she was; she'd tapped Bryce to her heart's content, and without sharing. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh? Then what did you mean?"

Shifting back and forth on her feet, Natalie bit her lip, clamped down on her self-control. "Ash's not feeling well. Anthony's sort of been on edge, too. Been a while since we had some really good...I mean, I was just wondering...I thought we'd share Bryce."

Kyna rolled her eyes. “Is that why you came down here? For Bryce’s *qi*?”

“I wouldn’t have come otherwise, but you left the party without telling me, and then...and then you didn’t call the next day. We usually do this together—I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Geez,” Kyna spat, rolling her eyes again. “Like I can’t manage on my own? Like I have to report to you every time I tap someone?”

Natalie felt her pulse quicken. “You didn’t have to hook up with Bryce. You could have just worked him over, gotten him all nice and woozy and then called me over and I would have finished. Christ, you haven’t *been* with anyone since Joshua. You stopped for a reason, and we agreed to help each other out. We do the dirty work, we put ourselves on the line so you can lead us to the good stuff. Or we do a body swap, and you leave us with a nice percentage when you’re through. That’s always been the deal.”

It was winter behind Kyna’s eyes. “Well, it’s not going to work that way anymore.”

“But *Ash* found him!” Natalie exclaimed. Immediately she cupped her hand over her mouth and clenched her stomach in an attempt to control the welling pressure.

Too late; Kyna rippled with the effect, seemed to grow larger and more massive than a professional bodybuilder, even though, in actuality, her body retained its normal shape. “Bry and I are together,” she said.

“You’re not serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

Natalie couldn’t believe her ears. It was as if she were watching a video replay of when Joshua had first come into her life. Back then, Kyna hadn’t known the danger in trusting oneself to a boy who looked good on the outside, but who was all rotten apples inside. She should have known better now.

“Kyna, look,” she said after a moment. “I didn’t mean to go off on you. It’s just, you’ve only known Bryce for a week. You could get hurt.”

Kyna shook her head. “I don’t think you care about me at all. I think you just want him all to yourself.”

“That’s not you talking, Kyna. It’s whatever’s flowing through your veins.” It was the same thing flowing through Natalie’s veins, the reason she’d come here, allowing her hunger to overpower her judgment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a bitch about this.”

“Sure you did,” Kyna snorted, already past the point of no return. “You’ve been working up the attitude ever since I first taught you how to throw your knack. You think you’re hot stuff, ready to leave me behind, and now you want Bry, and you don’t care if he’s actually in love with someone—you’re so conceited that you think I can’t be *loved* by someone.” She stepped forward, poking Natalie in the chest. “Problem is, you think you have the gall to strike out on your own, you think it would be just great to lead your own tribe. No more putting up with Kyna and her drama—but you don’t have the discipline to make it work.” Face to face now. “Let me tell you something about the way the world works: People don’t do

other people favors. They compromise, maybe, they give a little to get a whole lot more, but it's only to serve themselves in the end. See how much they can get before moving on to someone else. I'm not being left behind this time."

Tears began to cloud Natalie's eyesight. She sniffed and wiped her cheek. "I don't get you. You spend all your time refining the whole package. You're so good you can tap without the slightest trouble, and that makes you better than anyone I know. Yet you insist on opening yourself to Bryce because...because you think you need love? What's going to happen when he dumps you because he's fallen in *love* with some other girl?"

"He's not going to dump me for some other girl," Kyna said, her voice still on the offensive, though her expression had become flecked with uncertainty. "He's mine. I have control."

"Kyna—"

"It's time you moved on."

Their conversation ended. Kyna stepped back into the clubhouse, though she didn't close the door just yet. Rather, from what Natalie could make out, she was fishing around in her dresser for something. When she found it, she returned to the threshold and handed it to Natalie.

It was a small vial of blood.

"Here," she said, emotionless. "This is what you want, right? Well, take it. It's not Bry's, but it's good eating. Go off to your little hole with Anthony and suck it all up until you're too delirious to even breathe, but don't ask me for any favors anymore—ever. I'm done floating you."

She retreated into the clubhouse, slamming the door shut. The sound of the lock echoed in the air, reverberated in Natalie's eardrums long after she'd left the yard and started the walk to school alone—*really* alone for the first time in a long while.

Gripping the vial of blood, she started to cry.

Oh, Kyna...

* * *

Inside the clubhouse, Kyna waited with her head pressed against the door and her hand gripping the knob. Natalie's thoughts, confused and angry, echoed inside her head, and she choked back the urge to cry. Their parting ways was, however, necessary. Kyna needed her mind to be clear, needed her essence to be pure. Bryce would be all she ever needed, she knew that—but only if she did it right. Which wasn't to say she'd misstepped with Joshua back when she'd decided to take her first tragic plunge. No, he'd been a train wreck all by himself, and he'd tried to poison her with his collected miseries.

Now it was different.

Now I know what I'm doing, she reminded herself, moving away from the door, gathering her schoolbooks and putting them into her backpack.

Now I know what I'm doing.

Still, telling off a friend was never easy. Though she tried convincing herself that it was the right thing to do, her mood was in tatters, and it didn't improve with the passage of time. Her doubts nagged at her as she was in her mother's house, in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror after a too-cold shower and trying to fix her hair, trying to pluck her eyebrows—trying to look good when she felt almost nauseous. Halfway through the grooming process, her control slipped and she found herself staring at the ugly facade of a girl wounded beyond repair.

Damn it, she thought, trembling slightly, trying to focus herself. The scars wouldn't go away easily, though. They permeated her flesh like the pox, from head to toe, reminders of past battles, some won, others lost. She tried harder, but her body wouldn't respond—and suddenly all the old doubts came rushing back: *What if I've made a mistake? What if I need Natalie or Anthony or—hell—even Ash again when I'm down, when I have no one else to turn to?* She ground her teeth, summoned her calm, demanded it through the reserve power of her own stored anger. *Look at yourself, you wuss. You're missing the point. This isn't you. This is Edward you're feeling, all his corrupt impressions still pumping through you, all the stolen nightmares of all the women he raped. You've got to filter it out, ignore the bad and take the good. You know none of this is worth a damn if you're not willing to work for it.*

She strained even harder, watching her reflection, seeing her skin beginning to obey, smoothing itself out, melting back into the contours she ordained. In a moment she was herself again, her porcelain complexion regained, though she felt bloated, packed too full of other people's sins and desires. Perhaps they were her own; she couldn't tell.

She dressed and left the bathroom. As she passed the bedroom, she saw her mother fast asleep in her bed. On some mornings, Kyna would go in and cover her with a blanket; this morning she merely closed the door softly and made her way outside, where the air wasn't so stale, the ambient pressure not so foreboding.

The journey to Savanna High was wrought with bitter nostalgia. Without Natalie to talk to, her mind wandered, processing every irrelevant bit of information associated with her recent vow toward solitude. She supposed it had been a long time coming: years where Kyna had lead and the others had followed, eager to learn, eager to expand upon their knowledge—but she'd always kept them just enough in the dark, never really giving away all her metaphysical secrets, so that they would always need her. Most of the time they had simply accepted the arrangement, sticking with her because they'd die without their fix, because they weren't skilled enough at skimming off the cream flecking any good soul. Sure, they could go out and flaunt themselves, they could indulge themselves until they'd saturated their bloodstreams to the max, but they could never truly inherit the underlying energy behind it all.

Nevertheless, they'd tried. Anthony's parties had been thinly-disguised attempts at remedying the problem. He'd often teamed up with Natalie to try and practice herding the duds on their own, but Kyna was always the one who'd usually ended up fixing things.

One particular memory stood out in her mind: An early-year party at Anthony's—the usual fare that had come to dominate their harvesting activities as of late—that she'd attended so as to play along with what she'd considered a childish game. "Look how many duds *we* found tonight," she'd almost expected Anthony to boast. Of course, he'd never done anything that pompous. In fact, he'd pretty much steered clear of her for the majority of the evening, only making an appearance toward the end, when suddenly both Natalie and himself were coming at her from opposite sides of the house, their expressions dire. They'd been tag-teaming—and failing miserably. They'd begged her to come help at once; she'd gone, feasted, taken more than her share, just to show them up. The day after, they'd complained about it. Anthony had spouted off about how he was going to strike out on his own one day soon...though he never did.

Well, to hell with them all, then. They don't need me, I don't need them.

Without realizing it, she'd arrived at school and was now walking through the teacher's parking lot, heading toward the rear of the gymnasium. The swimming pool was located there.

She sat in the empty bleachers and waited for Bryce.

Chapter 25

The dream hadn't been all that bad. In fact, now that he'd had some time to reflect on things in a waking state, Bryce realized the ordeal had energized him. Without knowing exactly how it worked, he'd gained something from Kyna—a sort of stamina, like when they'd first slept together—without her even being in his presence. Edward, the bitter details involved in his nightmare, were nonsense from a fast-fading dream. As such, it didn't matter that he was waking up before dawn for zero period P.E. He felt as if he could swim two-dozen laps, run several marathons without faltering.

He showered and had breakfast, avoiding his parents altogether as he left the house. The walk to school was virtually instantaneous; he seemed to float just above the sidewalk, letting it slide beneath him—letting the entire world revolve around himself rather than moving *himself* around the world.

Sadly enough, he was bridled when he reached the boy's locker room and discovered that Coach Stieffel had decided to stick the zero period class in the swimming pool this morning. Normally, it wouldn't have mattered, but he'd forgotten to bring his swim shorts. It quickly became obvious he was unprepared for class when everyone marched out onto the pool deck for roll call and he was the only one in jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.

As Stieffel started calling off names, Bryce bit his lip, faced the bleachers—and smiled when he saw Kyna sitting at the top, pretending to be doing some last-minute homework (when really she was watching him). It was enough to lighten the mood.

"Powell," Stieffel barked when he'd reached Bryce's place in line. "Why aren't you dressed down?"

"I forgot my shorts at home," Bryce replied. Stupid, really, to tell the truth like that when he could have easily made up a half-assed story to cover himself, but he was still feeling giddy, and with Kyna present, his sense of mischief was turned up full blast. He wanted to act dumb, to tick Stieffel off because Stieffel was at his his best when he was ticked off.

"That's no excuse," Stieffel said, jotting something down in his ledger. "If you're not in that pool with everyone else, I'm marking you off for the entire week." He moved down the line.

Bryce rolled his eyes, stared after Stieffel for a moment, then up at Kyna, who stuck out her tongue and made an exaggerated Stieffel-face. He smiled and started undressing, kicking off his shoes and socks, his shirt and pants until he was standing in his boxers. It wasn't the most eloquent way to go, but, well, it would

allow him to put on a show for Kyna.

Look who's the exhibitionist, she sent. *Woo! Take it off!*

Bryce laughed to himself, but retained his boxers as he lined up with everyone else for laps.

Aw, I'm disappointed, Kyna sent.

Bryce flashed a devilish grin. *I should've done the nakie thing, huh?*

Totally. I bet even Stieffel would have given you extra points for that. God, the sky's not even blue yet; this guy's alarm clock must be set for four o'clock sharp.

If he ever sleeps at all, Bryce snorted. The boy in front of him turned, misinterpreting.

Hey, let's continue your training.

Right now?

Sure.

Bryce paused, counting the number of students in front of him. *I guess there's time to kill. What do you want to do?*

Bryce Powell vs. Coach Stieffel, one on one.

Okay...

Let's mess with him. You can do whatever you like to him. I'll provide guidance.

But how—?

It's just like in the dreams, or when you leave your body: You're using your mind to shape things, to control things. Granted, you can't morph Stieffel into a jackrabbit, but you can probably affect his mind enough to make him think he's one.

Why a jackrabbit?

Dork. That was just an example. You can make him think whatever you like.

Indeed. *But how do I...?*

Think of him, concentrate on him. Close your eyes and pretend you're seeing through his eyes instead of your own. Feel your soul filling his body, like water pouring into a pot. Your essence fitting his shape.

Bryce concentrated as she spoke, following her instructions until he suddenly felt the ground slipping beneath his feet. He felt as if he were stumbling forward out of himself. He closed his eyes as everything began to spin around him—

Concentrate. Hold him in your mind.

Unsure of exactly what he was doing, he tried his best to "concentrate." At first it was like trying to make all his muscles into steel ropes, and he quickly realized that if he didn't succeed in doing whatever it was he was supposed to be doing, he would very likely explode into a cyclone of charred fingernails and scorched hair. He defaulted to his natural instinct and allowed himself to be drawn (at Kyna's whim) out of his body and into Stieffel's—or rather, *most* of himself was drawn outward; there was still a shadow, an afterthought of himself left behind.

Keeping my lungs working and my heart beating, he supposed.

Exactly, Kyna responded. *Now, open your eyes.*

He conceded, and suffered a brief moment of disorientation; he was now standing on the other side of the swimming pool and gazing out across the deck through Stieffel's eyes. He saw his body standing in line, standing there in his

underwear and looking absolutely ridiculous. Of course, he'd seen himself before in mirrors or in video footage, but this...this was an entirely new perspective.

Don't worry, came Kyna's voice, soothing and steady. *I got your back. Better make this quick, though. I can only keep your body standing for so long...and it feels like Stieffel's getting irritated.*

Bryce thought quick, went with the first idea that came to mind:

"Everyone out of the pool!" he bellowed, working Stieffel's lungs. "Quickly! Move, move, move!"

The half-dozen students in the water quickly made for the opposite end of the pool as Bryce directed Stieffel's body toward the edge of the deck. It was like walking around inside an oversized Halloween costume. As he approached his destination, he imagined what everyone else was seeing: Stieffel, stepping calmly toward the water, dropping his shorts, and nonchalantly taking a leak in the deep end. The general reaction was stunned, comical horror. Some people laughed, others scrunched up their faces in disgust.

Kyna burst out laughing, and must have released her control, as Bryce felt himself being sucked out of Stieffel's body, seemingly treading water at the speed of light. He whizzed across the pool and slammed back into himself. He would have fallen over had a pair of boys not caught him first.

"Dude, are you okay?" asked one, helping him to stand.

Bryce heard himself laughing. "Yeah...thanks."

"Did you see what Stieffel just did?" asked the other.

"Yeah," he replied. "Guess when you've got to go, you've got to go."

All three of them laughed together.

For the remainder of the period, Bryce did push-ups with the other youths, though it wasn't as bad as it could have been knowing that Stieffel was royally embarrassed. Plus, not swimming meant not having to wear his underwear in the pool.

When it was time to go in, Kyna came down from the bleachers and met him where he was getting dressed. She pecked him on the cheek.

"Not bad," she said. "When you get better, you'll be able to control yourself while controlling someone else at the same time."

Bryce pulled on his shirt. "You mean I can take a leak while making someone *else* take a leak, too?"

She smiled. "I'll see you at lunch," she said, and started across the pool deck, toward the exit.

A thought occurred to him before she'd left completely. It wasn't really important, but it was a prickle in the spine nonetheless—a peripheral nag that had been with him since waking in the morning. He called out her name as he ran to her.

"Just a quickie," he said. "Last night, with Edward...that was all just in his head, right?"

"Of course. It was all mental. We didn't really *do* anything to him."

"So then...we wrecked him, like, mentally?"

Kyna didn't answer him. She was chewing the callous on one of her fingers.

"Kyna..."

She sighed. "He was a bad person, Bry. He did bad things to people. You saw his memories, what he did to your mother. He deserved what he got."

Of course, he agreed with her. Had Kyna and himself not intervened, Edward would be out there right now, sizing up his next victim. And it wasn't as if it hadn't felt good to wake up in the midst of a psychic culmination that had put any masturbatory session to shame. Almost as euphoric as those first few hours after Kyna and himself had slept together.

And yet...

"I know," he responded, suppressing whatever was attempting to climb its way out of his gut. "I was just wondering, that's all."

He smiled, kissed her once more, and jogged into the gymnasium.

Since he hadn't gotten any pool time, he didn't need to shower, and so went straight to the bathroom to fix his ponytail. However, mere seconds after he'd planted himself in front of a mirror, there was Stieffel, standing behind him red-faced and foam-mouthed. The man lunged at him before he could react, grabbed him around the neck and lifted him several feet into the air.

Oh, no, Bryce thought, feeling Stieffel's influence dominate his senses within a heartbeat. *Oh, no, no, no...*

"Interesting stunt you pulled out there," Stieffel said. "Childish, indicative of a lack of self-control." He squeezed harder. "Now, I want you to listen and listen good: I don't give half a crap how good you think you are at this little game you're playing, but if you disrupt my class like that again I *will* expel your sorry little ass. Is that understood?"

"Yes...sir," Bryce rasped. He could hardly breathe, let alone do anything but agree with the man who was rapidly cutting off the blood-flow to his brain, making him choke on his own saliva, his own fear—

—Stieffel let him go.

He collapsed onto his knees on the floor and rubbed his neck, coughed harshly. When he looked up, Stieffel was gone. The only witness to the event, a boy who'd been using the urinal, looked pale enough to have experienced some sort of post-traumatic blindness.

Damn, Bryce thought. *Don't mess with coach.*

Chapter 26

Thin as paper and lighter than air, Joshua made his way down the hallway of Savanna's main building. Though his face was pale and though his breath reeked of raw meat (his recent lunch, courtesy of his mother's freezer), he was otherwise none the worse for wear. In his hand he clutched a piece of paper, folded meticulously and bearing what could only be described as a dire message. Had he been several leagues more normal, as teenagers go, someone in passing might have thought he was about to deliver a love letter to a potential sweetheart during the crux of the courting process. In Joshua's case it was a grim final notice, a thinly veiled cry for help, to be delivered to a friend whom he'd never had the chance to actually make friends with.

If he'll listen, he thought, bitterly, halfway down the hall and ready to turn back. *But no one listens. Not to a ghost like me.*

"Just a moment, young man."

He stopped, turned around to see the attendance lady, her pudgy body wrapped in the flowery clutches of yet another shower curtain dress. She was huffing toward him.

"Are you just getting in?" she asked.

He sighed—a long, empty puff of air, the like of which might have exited a set of closet-ridden bagpipes. "No, ma'am."

"But you just came in through the main door, now didn't you? What class are you supposed to be in?"

"Um...505. Biology." Truth to tell he couldn't remember his schedule at the moment. However, he didn't have to. Though the attendance lady had begun to interrogate him further, though her mouth was forming words and sentences, she wasn't so much talking *to* him as she was talking *through* him. As she did this, he found himself studying her features, thinking of how good it would be to feast on her a little, perhaps nibble at her rotund arms a bit. He was no cannibal, but living flesh and blood was so much better than the frozen stuff, and after being empty for so long, after what Kyna had done to him—*using my body to prostitute herself and then draining me and leaving me for dead...even a fat whale of an attendance lady would be like eating five-star cuisine.* No doubt she was still single and laced with pastry-inspired self-pity and memories of diets-gone-bad, but it was energy, nonetheless, and he wasn't above taking advantage of such an opportunity.

Boy, would she provide for a slow burn...ah, but that wouldn't work. Not here, anyway. No one can see me when I'm Just Josh, but they might see something if I do the deed right now. Then it's cops and cuffs and Heather's parents all over me for

raping their daughter. Not as if she could remember her own name after the way I finished her off, but there's always the chance, always that opportunity for revenge... forget it, though. Just go to Bryce's locker, drop off the letter, and get out of here.

Keeping his aura extended, keeping the attendance lady locked into a cyclic redundancy check, he turned away. She kept right on talking to open air as he moved down the hall once again. At some point she forgot who she was talking to; he heard her voice trail off confusedly, heard the swish of her curtain-clothes as she retreated to her office.

He found Bryce's locker. Slipped his note through the grate and then walked away.

* * *

On his way to sixth-period P.E. (it very much seemed like all he did these days was run around in gym shorts...when he remembered to bring them to school) Bryce stopped by his locker to deposit his unneeded books. The note was waiting for him on the top shelf. Immediately his apathy and embarrassment concerning Joshua came flooding over him in a blush with all the fervor of a boiled lobster. He took the note in his hands. It read:

Dear Bryce,

I know you think I'm a jerk and a creep and probably a whole lot of other things too. I know I can't change that, and I'm sorry we couldn't be friends, but I still think you should know something about Kyna. I've messed things up a lot this last week, but I know if I didn't at least tell you the truth, then I'd *really* be a bad person, so here it is: Kyna and I used to go out. This is back when we were in junior high. We thought we were hot stuff together, but I guess not all things work out right sometimes. I found out that she has this mental problem, sort of a power trip thing—it's not her fault, but she hurts people, sometimes more than she expects or even means to. She wrecked me pretty bad, and it was more permanent than just emotional stuff. I think you get my drift.

I don't know what else to say. If I'm lying, if I'm full of it, then I guess that's what I am. You don't have to believe me. I just wanted you to know the truth.

Be careful.

Josh

Bryce crumpled the letter and stuffed it into his pocket.
So that's the game he wants to play, he thought. *Telling little lies in sneaky letters*

because he's too much of a wuss to face me in person and admit he's jealous I'm with his girl. Well, he can rot.

He closed his locker and left the hall.

* * *

Kyna waited for him after school. Together they walked to her place, sneaking in an assortment of playful kisses and booty-grabs along the way. Bryce didn't mention Joshua's letter because it didn't occur to him to waste any more of his time than necessary when dealing with stuck-up ex-boyfriends who couldn't get over the past.

That, and he was too busy meeting Mrs. Miller for the first time.

It was unintentional: Kyna and himself initially spread themselves out on her bed and started their homework. Ten minutes into a silent stretch of crunching equations and he was rolling onto his back, pouting like a puppy dog and asking for something to drink.

"Can't turn down a face like *that*," Kyna said, and kissed him on the nose.

"You *did* say I have puppy dog face."

"What do you want?"

"Anything with ice in it," he responded.

"Coming right up." Kyna smiled and left the clubhouse.

Bryce stood, stretched, and went over to the weight machine, where he started an impromptu circuit to pass the time. When he'd gone through a number of exercises without Kyna's return, he decided to go and search for her. He stepped out into the backyard, looked toward the rear of the house, where the kitchen door stood slightly ajar. Voices emanated from within—

—Kyna was arguing with someone.

Probably none of my business, he thought. Then again, hiding out in the yard and listening to the whole thing wasn't his business either, so he tossed aside any second thoughts and went to the house, pulled open the door, stepped into the unkempt kitchen, and found himself in the presence of a skinny woman in a nightgown. She was mostly skin and bone, with pale blond hair hanging down the sides of her head. She stood at the far end of the kitchen, a can of beer in one hand. Kyna was closer, and when she became aware of Bryce's entrance, she blushed bright red..

"*Mom*," she hissed. "Put some clothes on!"

Bryce felt himself blushing, too, as he started to back out again. "I'm sorry. I'll wait outside, Kyna."

"Aw, is that him?" asked Mrs. Miller. "Hang on there, sweetie. Let me sneak a peek at you."

He started to turn around, reached for the door as he heard a scuffling behind him (Kyna's attempt, no doubt, to restrain her mother). Mrs. Miller took hold of his shoulder before he could leave.

"Come on, baby. Don't be shy! Let's see you."

Bryce swallowed and faced her full, boiling inside his skin as she slapped him playfully against the chest.

"Oh, *Gawd*," she cooed, giggling like the proverbial school girl. "How'd you get a strapping young stud like this?"

Kyna attached herself to her mother, started pulling her away. "Mom, please! You're embarrassing me!"

Mrs. Miller fell into Kyna's arms, belching and mumbling something unintelligible into the side of her daughter's neck before passing out.

"Jesus," Kyna uttered, struggling with her mother's weight as she desperately dragged her toward the hallway.

Bryce had fixed his eyes on the floor at this point, but looked up when he heard Kyna clearing her throat uncomfortably, asking for his assistance despite the audacity of the situation. It was most likely worse for her than it was for him, so he complied without protest. Crossing the kitchen, he looped one of Mrs. Miller's arms around his shoulders and helped carry her to her bedroom, where he and Kyna spread her out on the rumpled bed. Kyna promptly covered her with a blanket, then motioned for Bryce to follow her out into the hallway.

"She's, um, got odd hours," she explained on the way back to the kitchen. "Usually she doesn't get up till later, but I guess she stayed home sick today or something."

There was pain in Kyna's voice, something more, even, than was warranted by one's mother being caught in her nightie, though Kyna didn't explain any further. Instead she went into the cupboard, found a pair of glasses, and filled them both with water from an Arrowhead bottle.

"Sorry, no ice," she said, handing Bryce a glass.

"That's okay," he replied.

He sipped quietly for a moment, the lack of air conditioning making the air seem heavy, making the sweat cling to his face and neck. A fly buzzed somewhere near a stack of dirty dishes, bringing to attention the fact that they hadn't been washed in far too long. Julia's kitchen had never deteriorated to a state even remotely close to this...but, then, his parents had stuck it out as a family. There was no such unity here.

He kept quiet, finished his drink and handed the glass back to Kyna, who placed it, along with her own, in the sink.

They went back into the clubhouse. Kyna promptly locked the door. "Let's work some more on your abilities," she said, and motioned for him to stand facing her.

"Do you trust me?" she asked, and took his hands in hers.

He nodded. "Of course."

"I need you to promise you'll trust me."

"I promise to trust you."

She let go of him for a moment, retrieving a pocketknife from the pocket of her jacket. When she took hold of him again, she held the blade to his arm—

"Hey—"

"Please trust me, Bryce."

It went against all his instincts, but Bryce nodded, held fast, steeled himself as she made a superficial cut, just enough to draw blood.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Stings," Bryce replied.

"Watch." Kyna lifted his arm to her mouth and fastened her lips to the wound, suckling, closing her eyes, savoring the taste of him as one might savor divine ambrosia. There was that familiar warmth again, only this time it was more potent. Electric, almost. He felt something passing between himself and Kyna, a combination of energies physical and mental.

Flowing.

Exchanging.

Sharing.

"What...?" was all he could get out before he felt himself falling forward and inward, Kyna lifting her mouth from his arm and smiling mischievously as she knocked his soul right out of his body. He went spinning up into free space, bouncing off the walls of the clubhouse like a rubber ball.

Kyna was there, too, and she was laughing hysterically.

He lunged playfully at her with arms that had no substance. Though he'd become more adept in this shadow world, she was nevertheless still the agile acrobat while he remained the blundering fool. Beneath them, their bodies—now motionless—remained standing like two video game characters on pause.

Don't we look good together? Kyna asked.

Bryce saw his physical face developing a blush, mimicking his unhindered emotions. He still felt like a voyeur, even though it was his own body he was spying on. *I thought we were going to work on my abilities.*

Kyna snickered. *We will...in a minute. First I want to finish something else.*

Her presence receded, and Bryce found himself somewhat alone. Below, Kyna had reanimated her body and was now lapping at his arm once more. At long last, she opened her eyes, lifted her mouth, let out a long, satisfied breath—

Bryce did a double take.

His arm was healed, the skin smooth and unbroken.

How...?

I told you: trust me, Kyna replied with an amused giggle. *Now, I've got to use the bathroom—*

Kyna, wait—

Don't go anywhere, lover boy.

How do I—?

But she was gone.

And Bryce felt himself listing off to one side, drifting through the wall of the clubhouse—*whoa!*—floating out and up above treetops and telephone poles. Kyna was somewhere nearby; he sensed that she was amused by his predicament. He wasn't really afraid of drifting off into oblivion. He could feel the invisible thread connecting himself to her. He knew she was just messing with him, and that at any

moment if he risked becoming lost, she could yank his thread back to the clubhouse.

With time to spare, he wandered, letting his soul float out across the city. He practiced mingling with the breeze, wriggling between forming storm clouds as the horizon flared bright orange and late afternoon began the descent into early evening.

Still, Kyna kept herself occupied elsewhere.

More time passed. Bryce was patient. Eventually he realized he was floating over his parents' house, settling down somewhat, drifting southward just the tiniest bit so that he could sense the conspicuous green tarp that covered Nathan Brown's backyard rain forest. He sank even further, passing through the tarp and finding himself entangled in the myriad foliage. His phantom toes brushed damp soil, his shadow eyes scanned the details of the miniature jungle.

Nathan's garden doppelganger waited against the rear wall.

* * *

Kyna smiled as she returned to the clubhouse and found Bryce's body standing right where she'd left it. The kitchen incident, grappling with her mother for a sense of misplaced decency, had been forced aside in her mind, replaced by the only underlying concern that really mattered to her: Bryce.

Forget Mom. Forget the world. I've got my hunky boyfriend.

She settled down on her haunches in front of him, considered her options momentarily before giggling and reaching up to undo his belt buckle, pull down his pants—

A piece of paper fell out of one of the pockets.

She picked it up, unable to refrain from seeing what it was. She unfolded it, started reading—and almost choked when she recognized Joshua's handwriting.

The maggot, she thought, clenching the letter tightly, digging her fingernails into the paper. *Still trying to bleed every last drop.*

She gazed at Bryce's tranquil face, so smooth, so angelic. Resting, dreaming... planning, scheming—*no. If he'd been brainwashed by that creep he wouldn't have come here. If he'd been into using girls for sex, he wouldn't have settled for me. No, Bry is still mine. I control him, totally. No problem there. But Joshua...*

There *was* a problem with Joshua.

Kyna slipped out of bed, waving the imaginary wand of her influence over Bryce's absent form so that he would remain that way until she decided it was time for him to wake up properly. She left the clubhouse, then, stepped into the alleyway, ran between the patches of mutated crabgrass and fossilized concrete, the broken glass, the used condom wrappers.

Everything will be fine, she thought. *Once I fix this...once and for all.*

Everything will be fine.

* * *

It was just as he remembered: an earthen cadaver, held together by fleshy roots and some ungodly sort of magic that allowed eyes—*human* eyes—to function, to focus, to see Bryce's bodiless approach as he drifted closer.

Crud, he thought, suddenly afraid. *I don't even need a body for him to see me.* He flinched figuratively, started to pull away, but there was a tide drawing him along, moving him forward until he was nose to nose with the doppelganger. He wanted to look away, but he had no eyes; there was only his awareness, and he was aware, at this moment, of Nathan's haunting likeness. The smell of the soil, the texture of the roots permeating Nathan's torso—the unmistakable presence of the face. It was as if someone had peeled off the man's flesh and planted it in a patch of dirt. Somehow, a mask had taken root and grown into this irregular monstrosity. Bryce half expected to find a living brain buried somewhere behind those glistening, beady eyes—eyes now holding his gaze, surer of his presence than he himself was. Nathan's crusted lips moved, and he began to utter a string of throaty noises. Somewhere amidst the cacophony was a string of coherent words:

Dreaming, are we? Or have you learned a thing or two about astral travel from your little girlfriend? Yes, you can hear, you can see...and all in real time, eh? Leafy arms extended themselves. Hands swished thin air. *Not the fractal patterns of sleep at all. But do you know? Are you the wisher or the wish?*

Bryce felt his essence convulse. He wanted very much to get away, though without a physical body, there was no part of himself he was familiar enough with to make good on his wish. And Nathan's presence was somehow holding him here, keeping him in limbo.

Kyna! he shouted.

No response.

* * *

The window was wide open, as expected. Kyna climbed through without a sound, lowered herself onto the floor and crouched, watching him. He was lying in bed, apparently dozing. She clenched her fists, ground her teeth; as furious as she was, she knew she couldn't bring herself to attack someone unaware.

Bastard, she sent, digging a sheer mental spike into the tender innards of his brain. *Don't make me take you down in your dreams!*

A sudden movement from the bed as Joshua lurched into a sitting position, his eyes glazed over with sleep, his breath ragged.

"Kyna...what...?" he began, but she was upon him immediately, pinning him down with her legs, cutting off his words with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Why did you tell him?" she demanded, throttling him, acting so violently that the whole bed shook. "Why, Josh? It's not your game anymore!"

Somewhere beneath the bloodless face, the terrified eyes, Joshua squeezed out enough breath to say, "He...had to know, Kee! You know why...he doesn't deserve to be...toyed with like you did to me!"

Kyna let out a feral growl and punched him in the face. He yelped feebly as

blood began to gush from his nose. *Like* I *did to* you*?*

My mom's going to hear...Kee...

Let her hear what's going on! Let her come waltzing right in here so she can see her carpet-stain of a son finally getting what he deserves!

Another blow to the face. Joshua's eyes rolled back in his head. *You're the... problem, Kee. Not me.*

She grabbed him around the neck, hauled him into a sitting position. *I gave my whole life to you, Josh! You swore yours to me, remember?*

A feeble nod. Blood trickling down Joshua's chin and chest.

We were kids. I didn't know what love was—neither did you. I don't need you, though. I don't need you to make me feel good about myself.

Immediately, Joshua's expression paled even further (if that was even possible at this point). He threw his arms over his face, trying to look as pathetic as possible—*you wouldn't hit a helpless person, would you?*—as Kyna lunged again, digging her fingernails into the flesh of his neck.

I know what you are! she screamed mentally. *Don't pretend you can hide from me!*

She squeezed harder, momentarily allowing her rage full access to the disciplined array of her muscles as she dug deeper, her fingertips penetrating skin and touching the frantic warmth beneath.

Joshua started to gurgle. His eyes rolled back in his head again—he was trying to black out, to escape the pain. *She'll kill me for it, over and done with—*

No, Kyna thought, suddenly letting up. *Not that easy. No good just killing you so you can go off to heaven or hell or whatever and be free of the mess you've made.*

She relinquished her grip on his neck, dug in with her mind, took hold of his soul so that it wouldn't submerge until she wanted it to. This way, he was adrift, fully awake, fully aware, but unable to move his limbs. She scooted down a bit, between his legs, and worked her hands into his underwear. She pulled and twisted and made good on the idle threat she'd sent him on so many occasions since their breaking up. Only now it was real: real Joshua squirming beneath her in agony, real blood spurting all over his belly, soaking the sheets.

She may or may not have finished the job. After an indeterminate amount of time, the pounding of her heart, the ringing in her ears became too much to bear and she tore herself from the bed. She left him there—convulsing, gasping without breath, bleeding to death in his own bed—and climbed back out through the window.

A sudden shower had darkened the sky, and raindrops pelted her, soaked her hair and clothes. A dozen yards off, barely into the alleyway that ran behind Joshua's house, her knees buckled and her gut spasmed as rage and bile combined into an acidic, unpalatable brine.

She fell to her knees and vomited.

* * *

Kyna. The girl's name, perhaps?

Bryce fidgeted, imagined that he still had sweat glands and that his clothes were soaked. He could feel a gentle probing, invisible fingers reaching into his essence, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to defend himself.

Nathan's doppelganger continued to feel the air with his hands, though the rest of him remained immobile. *Ah, but of course. There she is, bound to you, engraved upon your soul. A strong young woman.*

For whatever reason, the man was sounding more like Yoda than the beer-touting conspiracy-theorist Bryce had met a week previous. *How would he know anything about Kyna?* he wondered, forgetting that Nathan could obviously sense his memories and thoughts quite clearly.

Her essence is imprinted upon you. When two people share, the connection is fused and is never lost despite time or distance.

Bryce recoiled shyly, an image of Kyna flashing briefly in his mind. He grabbed the memory, stuffed it down somewhere Nathan hopefully couldn't see.

The garden cadaver leaned closer, chuckling. *No need to be shy about it, my boy. We all experience the wonder of unity at some point in our lives, don't we? Flesh to flesh or soul to soul. But your initial experience with her is relevant, as are all subsequent ones. She is taken away for that brief moment in time when unity is achieved. She is free from the inner turmoil that she has unwittingly been harboring for much of her life. Sharing is a marvelous catalyst, and when it's delivered by one you love, peace is close at hand...but often just out of reach, for as quickly as you escape the physical plane, so are you returned. The prize is dangled, you are allowed to touch, but alas rarely to keep.* A momentary pause. Glistening eyes scanning Bryce's soul. The intuited sound of rain hitting the tarp above. *Can't you feel it? Can't you sense her predicament even now? She's caused someone else great pain, and now she herself is in great pain, for there is a battle being fought, between self and self. She's afraid she's losing. That's why she doesn't come for you right now.*

Oddly enough, now that it had been brought to his attention, Bryce *did* feel something—a vague pull, a twisting deep down inside himself—and he realized that half of what he was feeling was actually being caused by something external, something outside himself, something being funneled into his essence.

Kyna.

Suddenly, he didn't want to be here anymore. He wanted to be back in the clubhouse, back in his body so he could assess the situation, figure out just what was going on. But he didn't know how.

Nathan—Mr. Brown, he called out, suddenly anxious beyond belief. *How do I...?*

A pause from Nathan, whose gaze lifted, focusing on something distant. Bryce felt himself becoming suddenly lighter, and it was as if a violent wind had kicked up, hurling him away from the doppelganger, up and out of the garden, into the storm-charged air and across town—

—she is with you now.

* * *

The entire clubhouse seemed to jolt on Bryce's waking. He took several deep breaths, willing his heartbeat to ease up somewhat as he reached for his pants, which had somehow dropped of their own accord. He drew them up, fastened his belt, and stood shivering from head to toe as he listened intently to the sound of the rain pelting the aluminum rooftop.

"Kyna?" he called out, his voice quavering uncontrollably. He wondered why he was shaking. He'd left his body many times during his lessons—it shouldn't have been anything new. Then again, he *did* just have a mental conversation with a talking vine corpse.

The door rattled and slid open. Kyna entered, water dripping from her hair and clothes, mud sloughing off her shoes in unsightly gobs. It was hard to make out the exact details of her face, but he knew without seeing that she wore a haggard expression, and he also knew (now) why he felt the way he did.

"Kyna," he whispered, moving to get out of bed.

She closed the door, met him halfway. She threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Bry," she whimpered, and started crying.

Unsure of what to do, he held her for several minutes, not caring that he was getting soaked. He asked her what was wrong, but she wouldn't tell, so he merely continued to hold her.

Patiently, he waited for it to pass.

Chapter 27

Bryce's senior year ended with little fanfare. The transition from Savanna High to summer school was a welcome one, if only because it meant not having to wake up every morning to Coach Stieffel. Also, he was no longer the new kid, no longer the southern-fried cowboy misfit; *all* the students in continuation were misfits of sorts, trying to make up for lost time, trying to pull together the credits needed to graduate. That in itself had a leveling effect Bryce much preferred to the drama of public school.

As he'd promised to himself, he never returned to Edward's warehouse, never offered an official resignation (it had been, after all, an under-the-table arrangement), and only thought about it when, perhaps a week after the nightmare incident, Daniel happened to bring up the fact that Edward was undergoing therapy for some sort of mental trauma. No one said anything forthright, but Bryce sensed that his father was quietly elated by the news—a sort of vengeance, if you will, for Edward's sleeping with his wife.

In late June, Bryce quietly turned eighteen and got a job as a bagger at the supermarket across the street from his parents' house. Initially, Kyna was dubious about the notion, insisting that he could get whatever he wanted or needed with just a little mind magic here or there (she herself had acquired her clubhouse for free from the local garden center). Bryce had a tedious conscience, though, and he knew it. Adult life was only tolerable if he had something to *do*, and so Kyna acquiesced, going with him when he picked up an application, influencing the store manager to take to Bryce immediately.

When he wasn't stuffing grocery bags full of ground beef packages or canned goods, he was with Kyna. They often worked out or sneaked into movies together. When they were in the clubhouse, they practiced out-of-body navigation or simply lay together on her bed listening to music.

They shared often. It was was sex and blood both. Kyna never explained the blood part fully except to say that it was how sharing worked. If ever he pressed her on the matter, his thoughts clouded over, and the importance of knowing evaporated in his mind like so much vapor. Sampling his blood at regular intervals somehow seemed to invigorate her. Almost always, she would jump his bones immediately afterward, and it was on these occasions that their time in the sack was the most vigorous, the most satisfying. Maybe it was some kind of fetish, or some kind of aphrodisiac. A pain-pleasure thing. But he trusted her. She always healed his wounds. If that was her price for the all-he-could-eat nookie buffet, he was willing to pay.

June became July and life continued to drift lazily by. Kyna turned eighteen. Bryce graduated. There was no birthday party or commencement ceremony, and both of them were fine with that. Kyna hated parties; Bryce couldn't care less about the senior high school class he never knew. Theirs was a quiet, secret little life existing on Anaheim's periphery, and that's exactly how they liked it.

Still, beneath the pleasantness, beneath the mornings, afternoons, and evenings spent savoring the slow burn, there was an itch. Nothing major just yet, nothing that couldn't wait for the day when it felt right to really discuss such things, but Bryce felt it: a subdued curiosity, a dull recognition of something he would have to face someday.

Like when, on that rainy evening he'd left his body only to wake up after a rather unusual mental visit to Nathan Brown's backyard Amazon with Kyna returning from somewhere, her hair and clothes sopping wet, her demeanor ripped to shreds. She never revealed to him the details of her whereabouts, and though he knew it perhaps wasn't his business to pry, he often wondered why she couldn't bring herself to share such things with him even though they were sharing everything else.

Even when he knew it was festering on the inside.

Like today, he thought on a sweltering afternoon in mid-July. Long-since convinced by the heat of the impracticality of doing anything truly meaningful with the day, Kyna and himself were stripped down to shorts and T-shirts, and were sprawled on her bed, fiddling idly with their cell phones. *Not much to talk about, so we haven't talked at all—just in case the subject comes up.*

Drunken laughter sounded from inside Kyna's mother's house.

"Sounds like your mom's got company," Bryce said, lifting his head slightly, listening.

Kyna scowled. "Probably just Dead Man."

Dead Man, Bryce thought, recognizing the nickname Kyna had given her father. "He still comes around?"

Kyna's eyes went opaque. She stared up at the ceiling. "It's not important—let's talk about something else."

Shot down, once again.

"Okay," Bryce said. He quieted for a moment, considered pursuing the matter further, though there was no real reason he needed to earn this specific piece of background information at the moment. So, he thought of other things—typical tangents that often fluttered through his mind when he wasn't concentrating on something specific. "I was at work the other day, and I came to the realization that I'm too average."

Facing him, Kyna propped herself up on one elbow. She set her lips into a melancholy semi-smile, with just the edges curling upward. "Not at all." She reached out, squeezed his bicep affectionately.

He smiled halfway, a bit disappointed at how easily she'd warmed to the prospect of mere idle talk, and scooted into a sitting position, with his back resting against the headboard. "I mean it. I feel like a statistic sometimes."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. I just get to thinking like this on days when it's hot and lazy."

Kyna moved against the headboard as well. "But you have something that sets you above all the others. I've taught you."

"Yeah...but I'm still just *me*. I'm still just some dude who lifts weights and works at a grocery store and that's it. I mean, it's not necessarily that I don't know what I'm supposed to do with my life, it's that I don't *care* to know what I'm supposed to do with my life. Aren't I supposed to care? You know, about scholarships, college, career—like, what's my purpose? What's my talent?"

"Screw that," Kyna said, resting her head against his shoulder. "You've got plenty of talents."

"Like what?"

"You can dress yourself."

"Oh, *wow*."

"You have a sunny disposition."

"Yay."

"You can pack all a person's groceries into a single bag without the bag being heavy."

Bryce sighed, a bit disappointed by her unspoken insistence on ignoring his desire for sincerity. "*Right*."

Kyna seemed to catch a bit of his sarcasm. "Are you really hung up on the whole meaning of life thing?"

"It's mildly concerning, yes."

"You're worried over nothing. Really. There's a place out there for the Clubhouse Kids to make their own little niche. Doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. We don't even need a house. A nice apartment would do, some place we can cram all the little Bryce and Kyna Juniors we're going to have." Kyna laughed; it was a hollow sound. "Maybe there'll be some humongous earthquake next year, and California will finally slip into the ocean, and the resulting tsunami will wipe out ninety percent of the Earth's population, and then it'll be up to you and me to repopulate the planet."

Bryce groaned. "Assuming we survive."

"Yep."

"That's a lot of work."

"Uh-huh."

He bit his lip, then, and considered, forcing his mind to project itself beyond eighteen, beyond the grocery store—years down the line, maybe. Living on his own, away from his parents, for sure. With Kyna? Most likely. Small apartment, cool. But children? That was unfathomable. Almost as audacious as actually trying to repopulate the Earth with two horny teenagers calling the shots.

"What could a couple of kids possibly learn from us?" he asked after a few minutes' listening to the muffled sound of Dead Man and Mrs. Miller's merriment.

"Lots and lots and lots," Kyna replied, closing her eyes. "The boys will be sweet,

charming and handsome; the girls will be smart and beautiful, and they'll make all the other kids at school jealous because they'll have the hunkiest dad on the block."

"Dream on. The boys will be little hooligans, the girls will be smart-alecks—just like their mother."

Kyna scowled. "But you'd love them anyway, wouldn't you?"

Bryce thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I would."

A moment's pause, Kyna's expression going distant. "What if I told you I was pregnant?"

For a moment, Bryce experienced utter panic as an almighty "oh-God" escaped his lips—along with a gasp that, had it been just the slightest bit stronger, very well could have expelled his heart. Kyna merely stared back at him, eyes level, lips perfectly relaxed...waiting.

"I...I thought you said you-you could control y-your cycle," Bryce began, grasping for words, squirming against the sheet. *Oh, God—this can't be happening!*

"Christ." Kyna scowled, slapped him against the chest. "I'm only kidding about the being pregnant thing. Geez, Bry! Way to take it like a man."

"Very funny," he responded, wiping his brow.

"You're such a big baby."

Bryce merely grunted, still trying to get a hold on his pulse.

Kyna made a sympathetic face and returned her attention to her phone. It was the nature of their relationship. Or so he told himself. She knew everything about him, knew where all his secret buttons were—knew how to illicit whatever response she wanted. He, on the other hand, knew almost nothing about her besides what she'd already agreed to share: that she'd had a dysfunctional childhood piloted by a half-coherent flower child mother and an on-again-off-again control freak father named "Dead Man." That was it. Whenever Bryce took a tentative step further into her personal realm, she clammed up.

The answers weren't coming, but in time, he was sure, she would most certainly open up.

Hopefully.

He closed his eyes and settled, drifting off in the still afternoon heat. With her in his arms, he was reminded once again why it wasn't all that difficult to tolerate the not-knowing, and he vowed patience, to wait for the days, weeks, and months to unearth all the secret memories and experiences that made Kyna Miller who she was.

Because it'll never be this good again, and you know it.

Chapter 28

Time didn't heal all wounds, but it did provide a suitable bandage for those in need of a workaround. Kyna was counting on time to carry her away from the nagging trauma of the incident at Joshua's, though the image of his grief-stricken face was always hovering ever-present around the periphery of her thoughts.

Doing things with Bryce helped. The weekend after he received his first *bona fide* paycheck, they went together to the mall for lunch. Afterward, they browsed the specialty shops. Kyna didn't have more than a few dollars on her, though she still picked out a handful of items—which she paid for with a keen glance at the cashier—from one of the clothing stores. Bryce seemed a bit dubious about this, offering to pay, but she turned him down, whispered to him on the way out that it was no use having a special ability unless she was going to use it.

"I guess so," he said, shrugging.

He also mentioned that he wasn't confident enough with his own skills to filch the majority of his store purchases just yet. He was good at it, no doubt about that; he just needed to become more comfortable. Kyna herself had worked steadily at this, practicing every night with him once summer began. By mid-July he could easily manipulate strangers on the streets, no blood required. With Natalie and Anthony, it had taken a good, solid year before they could do relatively well without blood assistance. Yet, here was Bryce, a supposed dud before Kyna had met him, a virtually endless well of *qi*—a prodigy whose knack was on par with her own—and what did he do with it? What did he use his overflowing abundance for? Small things: a free drink here, a free bus ride there...free movie tickets on Fridays.

It was like owning a shiny-new BMW and never taking it out of the garage for a spin.

"If you won the lottery," Kyna said one Saturday evening when she was perusing the frozen-food section of the grocery store with Bryce, "and you had, like, ten-million dollars just chilling in your bank account, wouldn't you do something with it?"

"I'd never win the lottery," Bryce answered offhandedly, apparently trying to decide between two relatively similar packages of frozen burritos. "But if I did, I guess I'd finally get a savings account or something."

Kyna frowned, inside and out. "Your ingenuity never ceases to amaze me."

"You *know* I'm the post-material type."

"Doesn't matter. It's like marking your territory. Keeping everyone else aware that you have a certain status so that they don't start picking on you or treating you like a dud. I mean, why *wait* for a confrontation to happen? Why go through all

the anticipation of saving up for something special when you can have it now?"

Bryce sighed, glanced around. His gaze caught something, and suddenly he was off, heading down the liquor aisle. He hefted a six-pack of beer from the freezer and presented it to Kyna, a proud grin on his face.

"Beer?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "You're a drinker?"

He shrugged. "Not habitually."

"This is your big idea? Using your knack for a six-pack?"

Bryce grabbed a second one. "Okay, one for you, too."

"You're such a dork," Kyna said. She did, however, consider his offer. She herself had kept away from alcohol all her life, had never taken the chance that she might turn into one of those maniacal, suicidal drunks bellowing all her problems to the wind in broken English—like Dead Man, whose hands always seemed to be occupied with some variety of cheap booze.

Or my mother's boobs, she thought, a moment of bitterness causing her to scowl. However, with Bryce's offer, there was an element of laid-back playfulness. This wasn't an excuse for him to get laid, nor was it an invitation for a dinnertime argument. She could easily imagine him as a silly, lovable drunk, and so she nodded, agreed that this was a lame-but-acceptable stretch of his imagination.

They found a checkout lane, bagged the beer, burritos, a bag of corn chips, a small container of chilled salsa, and a copy of *Maxim* (Bryce's idea), all without the need for cash or ID. Behind them, a half-dozen other shoppers waited in line, some watchful of the transaction, others busy absorbing the tabloid headlines. Thanks to Kyna's mindfulness, not one of them quite caught on to the fact that a pair of naughty teenagers were leaving the store without having paid for their groceries.

Later, in the clubhouse, Bryce and herself got quite drunk and fooled around haphazardly until dawn, at which point Bryce gave in to exhaustion and passed out.

Kyna remained awake, lying still on her back and listening to the sound of Bryce's breathing. Gradually, she curled her fingers so that she clutched the blanket tightly, a mental itch at the small of her back causing her to writhe slightly, to perspire, even, despite the comfortable temperature.

How many times, she thought, *did you imagine Joshua's face last night? Trying to stay with Bry, trying to concentrate on each moment, but you end up closing your eyes and seeing Joshua there, lying in his bed, always there, wasting away, turning to dust...slowly starving to death while you feast on Bry's* qi *like it's Thanksgiving dinner—stop it. Stop acting like you care for him, goddammit. It's not you—it's the alcohol. Too much too drink, and now instead of throwing it all up, you've absorbed every last self-deprecating drop.*

Morning progressed, and Kyna suffered silently, drifting in and out of a restless sleep until just before noon, when she happened to glance down at herself and saw that her right forearm had acquired an unsightly scar. She felt her heart leap into her throat; she sucked in a breath, blinked, and found her arm was smooth again, that perhaps she'd merely projected the scar onto herself during a moment of unsolicited anxiousness.

Move along, she thought. *Keep yourself occupied.*

"Ugh," she groaned, yawning wretchedly, the heavy funk of her morning breath seemingly permeating the very fabric of the time space continuum. She sat up, making sure to move around enough so that Bryce would be roused.

Beside her, he mumbled something and burped. "Y'awright?"

"Pig," she replied, going through the motions as she kissed him. Her emotional state (and her exhaustion) kept her from enjoying it, though.

Bryce sat up and stretched. "I feel like garbage." He pulled random bits of sweat-dried hair from his face. "I need a shower."

"Me, too," Kyna replied. She could smell the beginning of a feral odor escaping her armpits.

Amazingly, Bryce's appetite seemed to have been spared by his hangover. He left the bed, went over to the dresser, where he stood in his boxer shorts and had himself a makeshift breakfast comprised of stale corn chips and half-dried salsa.

Kyna groaned. "How can you eat like that?"

Bryce shrugged, scowling at the smell of his own morning breath. "I'm hungry."

Promising herself strict abstinence from any future alcoholic opportunities, Kyna sat at the edge of the bed, where she worked at alleviating the symptoms of her hangover. She felt nauseous, too tight in her own skin. She exerted her willpower, massaging her temples with her fingers and imagining the flow of invisible energy working its way into her brain, fooling her pain receptors into thinking all was well.

Harder than it usually is, she thought, feeling the extra burden of the alcohol in her veins. *I hate this. Why didn't I just tell him "no?"* The answer was simple: to keep him occupied. *To keep him mine. Lower my standards a little bit because without compromise he'd feel rejected, maybe even suspicious. Maybe I thought I'd enjoy it, losing control and not caring for just a while—but I can't even do that. Not for a second, unless I want everything to come spilling out all over the place. Unless I want to chase him off too soon.*

She continued the massage, watching Bryce slowly devour the last of the chips. She thought back to when they'd first officially become a couple, and she realized that since the onset of summer there had been a handful of instances when acquaintances from work had invited him to socialize. Lunch, parties, trips to the movies—Kyna had exerted her will on each occasion to convince Bryce that he'd have more fun spending his time with her. If he ever affected indecision, she offered him make-out time, and, well, he *was* a guy, after all, so such an arrangement wasn't all that bad. By now they'd learned each other's style, had settled into a groove. She could just *be* with Bryce...sort of like when she'd *been* with Joshua, only now it actually mattered. Now she felt she was putting herself to good use rather than simply pacifying a spoiled brat.

Woops, she thought, frowning. *Thinking of Josh again...as if I don't have enough of a bad taste in my mouth.*

She tried to laugh it off, but the thought was there: a mental portrait, framed in

misery and pain, of the boy she'd once given herself to. She could argue that she'd been young, that thirteen-year-olds didn't have the slightest clue what love was—that she'd let Josh have his way with her because she would rather have been *any* man's property, so long as she wasn't Dead Man's—but she could never really forgive herself.

And what about your more recent mistakes? she heard herself thinking. She went over to the weight machine. *Have you really taken care of things by getting rid of all the old lackeys once and for all?*

No answers, as usual, though a month into her vacation had convinced her (mostly) that the more chronological distance she put between herself and the things she disliked, the easier they were to ignore. Likewise, the more time passed, the less she found herself thinking about how she was lying to Bryce—but what did it matter that he wasn't really her first serious boyfriend, that he wasn't the first person she'd shared with? He didn't need to know; any pathogens she'd acquired from Dead Man or Joshua or any of the dozens or hundreds of people she'd tapped over the years had long since been rendered dormant through her knack.

Bryce didn't need to know.

Still, on those occasions when they were alone together, when Bryce would gaze into her eyes, she would see the questions there, the curiosity—*tell me what you're thinking*—and it reminded her that while he'd shared himself completely (and perhaps naïvely), she was still a relative mystery to him. He was tolerating it, accepting it, perhaps. *But it all comes back to that conundrum, doesn't it? That notion of someone seeming okay, so that must mean they are...but it doesn't make it right.*

"What do you think about when you do that?" Bryce asked. He'd pulled on his shorts and was now leaning casually against the dresser as he worked his hair back into a tail.

All the things I've found that are wrong about myself, Kyna thought, starting a set on the pec deck. "Nothing."

"Aw. You never tell me what's on your mind," Bryce said, smiling playfully enough.

Kyna smiled back at him, forced a bubble of worry back into the pit of her stomach. Deviating some of the effort from her workout, she exerted her will. "Do you want to know what's on my mind?"

"Yeah," he replied, folding his arms. Not, she thought, out of resistance to her subdued mental probing (which he probably wasn't focusing on at the moment, anyway), but an example nonetheless of his lingering interest in what made her tick.

She brushed his curiosity aside, facing forward again and counting off as she worked her arms. "I was just thinking that your breath smells like crap."

Bryce smirked. He reached for his shirt. "I feel like crap. Do me a favor and punch me in the face the next time I come up with a brilliant idea to get us both hammered."

"Deal."

Chapter 29

Bryce sat slumped in front of his bedroom window and remembered rain as he stared down at the parched driveway. He'd showered after coming home from Kyna's, and now the slight afternoon breeze helped to dry his hair.

What a strange day that had been, he thought. *Strange dreams, strange time coming home after the storm, after holding Kyna for what seemed like hours and wishing I knew what was going on.*

She'd never told him, of course—only sent him home with a thirst for answers, though he knew there was no sense in demanding to know what had happened that day, why she'd thrown him out of his body in the first place—*why she'd left me floating around Nathan's backyard while she went...somewhere.*

He sighed and cast his mind outside his body, alleviating the "heaviness" of his hangover.

Far enough, he thought, *to outrun this headache.*

Gradually, over a period of several minutes, he felt a knot within himself loosen, and the effects of the previous night's drinking binge faded away.

Nifty trick, he thought, smiling and recalling Kyna's lessons—though he wasn't about to make excuses for future drinking binges. His knack would probably take care of the aftereffects every time (and whenever he pleased), but it would be too much like having allergies, hanging around pollen or pet dander every day, and popping pills to clean up his sinuses whilst simultaneously sneezing, wheezing, gasping for breath.

He eased outward even further, and eventually he found himself floating outside, over his parents' house. Nathan Brown's backyard Amazon was a tentative lure as certain questions filtered into his mind regarding his last out-of-body visit with the garden doppelganger—a strange experience, for sure—but by now he'd come to accept such anomalies as everyday life in Anaheim.

What had the doppelganger told me? Something about Kyna and himself, but it was hard to recall. He *did* know that it made him embarrassed. He couldn't fathom why this was, so he let himself be carried himself along.

Over the city, next: He brushed various locations, sometimes actually passing through buildings or people (who twitched or shivered upon the spectral contact). He passed Savanna High, where students in summer sports and catch-up classes were sweating over footballs and pop quizzes. He slipped further south, to another part of town, somewhere he'd never been. It was a lower-middle-class neighborhood; the homes were all single-story, with half-dead lawns and cracking streets—not quite a ghetto just yet, but a decade or so past its prime.

Orange curtains, he thought, and suddenly he was there, floating on the breeze as a stray feather might, brushing through an open bedroom window and into an oddly stirring scene: a rumpled bed, surrounded by several tables and plastic crates supporting water bottles, empty food bowls, a stack of magazines and comic books, and a beat-up television.

Joshua, bruised and bandaged, was at the center of it all.

Whoa, Bryce thought, experiencing something like pity. *He must have been sicker than hell, or else he got in an accident or something. Geez. He looked ragged when I first met him, but this...*

Appalled at this blatant display of misery, Bryce moved closer and saw that Joshua was dozing lightly. He could feel his presence close at hand, and he sensed the true agony filling the room. It permeated the air, stuck to the stitched skin sweating beneath the blanket, where the ragged flesh between his legs was healing ever so slowly.

Bryce? Joshua called, a swift feeling idling just above the bed.

But Bryce wasn't listening. Instead, he was reaching backward, tugging at the invisible cord that was attached to his own body—pleading with himself to get away from this horrific reality.

Wake up!

Suddenly he was back home. There were tears blurring his vision as he left his bedroom for a drink of water. He happened to step (quite shakily) out into the hallway at precisely the same moment Daniel was exiting the master bedroom. The two of them almost collided.

"Sorry," Bryce apologized, stepping out of the way and wiping his cheek with the back of his hand.

"No problem," sighed Daniel. He had a blanket and pillow in his arms. He seemed not to be in the mood for anything more, conversation-wise, but was drawn in by Bryce's apparent distress. "Something, er, the matter?"

Bryce shrugged and tried to make it look as if he was intensely interested in his feet. "Naw. I was just napping."

Daniel nodded, let out another, more subdued sigh. "Out last night?"

A shrug from Bryce, who had no answer. Even if he did, it probably wouldn't have gotten him in trouble unless he'd tracked blood or marijuana leaves into the house. Less to deal with that way.

"Well," Daniel said, after a moment, "you just...stay out of trouble, okay?"

"Okay."

Father glanced at son, swallowed, looked away; son glanced back, bit his lip, and tapped his toes against the floorboards. Despite their relative detachment from one another, neither was quite ready to resume his previous activities just yet.

"How's the girl?" Daniel asked.

"She's okay," Bryce replied. He was unsure what he'd already revealed about Kyna over the summer, so he kept his answer simple.

A nod from Daniel. "That's good. You two get together often, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. Working on our plot for world domination, you know."

"Ah." Daniel looked down at the blanket and pillow. "I'm not much of a family man. I always tend to let the homestead run on autopilot most of the time, when I can help it. I guess it's something I should have looked after more carefully."

"It's okay," Bryce said. It really was, for though he'd grown up with a distinct rift between his parents and himself, he'd never felt neglected. They'd always provided for him. Sure, most of his social conditioning had come from friends, school, and television, but he didn't feel cheated, either. Things in the Powell household just *were*, and there was no reason to pretend that it should have been any other way.

Daniel seemed relieved. Still, he added a final statement once Bryce had moved down the hallway: "You've always been special to us. Your mother and me."

Bryce shrugged, started down the staircase. "I know."

In the kitchen he poured himself a glass of water and downed it in one long gulp. Through the window he could see Julia quietly kneeling in the backyard with her trowel as she tried her best to offset concrete with potted poinsettias. Somewhere on the fringes of his awareness he could see a boy whose ravaged body slowly shifted between the burlap texture of rumpled bed sheets.

Somewhere between dying and dead.

Chapter 30

Joshua dreamed of school, most of all. Of course, during the surgery (and the initial week of recovery, thereafter), he was too exhausted, too emotionally and spiritually depleted to dream at all.

The microvascular surgeons had been quite somber throughout the entire process. An examination of his medical history—heck, just *seeing* him—was cause enough to make one think, "God in heaven, here's a kid who's not even old enough to drink yet, and already he's been nearly burned to death, he's got scar tissue over seventy-percent of his body, and now he's back in the hospital again with a set of broken ribs and a mangled penis."

Much like Humpty-Dumpty, he was reassembled, sent home to begin the slow, steady process of recovery. How his body continued to function, he couldn't fathom. Sick, injured, *dying*, he'd drifted in and out of sleep, on and off Vicodin-induced planes of consciousness. He fully expected, at every turn, to find himself materializing in some lower level of hell, though after the first week it became apparent he was to remain stuck in the flesh for the time being.

He was able to remove the catheter at the end of the first week; after the second, the cystostomy tube was removed. His mother insisted on checking on him often, especially during those first few days after he was discharged from the hospital. Normally, he kept her away, throwing his knack here or there so that she would bypass his bedroom altogether and find herself absorbed in some other task whenever she wanted to see or speak to him. However, in his weakened state he was able to do little more than concentrate on his own breathing, and so he endured the unendurable: having his mother feed and coddle him, like a baby; having her help him whenever he needed to urinate; sitting beside him during the evenings, sometimes gently brushing her hands over his scalp as she spoke to him or cried softly to herself.

"Oh, Joshua," she said one night, standing over his bed after she thought he'd fallen asleep. "What am I going to do with you?"

Through closed eyelids he imagined what she looked like, her weary face and lackluster hair drooping sadly, her shoulders somewhat stooped. No doubt she still wore her work clothes. Oftentimes she would come directly home and into his room like this...oftentimes she would be too tired to weep over her son's sorry state or the fact that she was now locked into a lifetime of expensive medical bills.

So she spoke to him. Softly, gently she would relate to him the stories of the day: little anecdotes here, little jokes there. If she thought he was asleep, she sang to him or told him children's stories.

She sang to him now, and though her voice quivered and cracked more than once, though she didn't know all the words, she sang "Always" to the best of her ability.

"To make up for all the time," she explained afterward, "that I spent arguing with your father instead of taking care of you."

She kissed him on the forehead, then, and left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Joshua opened his eyes slightly, told himself not to let her come back during the night. *She needs her sleep, needs to go a night without knowing that there's a dying monster sleeping in her house. I'm one big failure, and I'm dragging her down with me. It was supposed to be different, once Dad left...but I had to go muck things up because I was thirteen, because I had ambitions and no one warned me enough to keep me out of trouble when it mattered. But I wouldn't have listened anyway. I knew everything about everything, and it nearly killed me—twice. It was all my fault, not Mom's. Let her feel normal for a change...like she raised a decent son and not a delinquent.*

It was still fairly early, but he was already exhausted. Closing his eyes again, he bit the inside of his mouth, just hard enough to draw blood.

He swallowed what he could before dozing off.

* * *

Once, long ago, thirteen-year-old Joshua Swaney strode across the Dale Junior High School blacktop with an assured smile on his face. On this particular afternoon he wore a newly-acquired hoodie, concert T-shirt, his favorite bright red slims, and turquoise sneakers. He was aglow with purpose, mischief, and youth, and he knew it so well he could have planned out the entire day while having his morning shower.

Though he didn't consider himself a fashion buff or a mirror-hogging perfectionist, the precocious punk-skater/beach-boy image he'd cultivated had been, in a sense, crafted as the result of a driving desire to be noticed, to persuade others to direct themselves to *him* rather than the other way around. And when he really felt it, he radiated confidence in a way that not even the staunchest teacher's aide, hallway monitor, or schoolyard bully could resist. It was his take on the inevitability of adolescence—his determination to enter puberty with a swagger.

His friends, Todd and Stevie, were having lunch at one of the benches they'd resolutely claimed earlier in the school year. Having endured the two-week Christmas vacation, the former had plumped somewhat, while the latter appeared to have kept to his bedroom for most of the time.

Joshua slapped hands with both boys and took his seat.

Todd nodded and immediately asked, "What did you guys get for Christmas?"

"A new phone...some cash from my grandparents," Stevie replied, shrugging nonchalantly.

Joshua smiled inwardly. He knew that secretly Stevie had been wanting a new

phone for the better part of a year, but he was playing it down because it was lame to get really excited as such.

Waiting for me and Todd to ask about it before he shows it off, Joshua thought. *Waiting to grab our attention, like always.*

Todd looked at him now. "And you?"

My turn. "Not much," he replied, shrugging and holding back his own pent-up excitement. "My dad skipped out...for good."

Todd looked baffled; a blob of strawberry jam escaped his mouth. Stevie merely scowled as if Joshua had just informed him of the extrication of a clinging baby tooth.

"That sucks, dude," Todd said, after a moment.

Joshua feigned disinterest as he unpacked his lunch. In actuality he hated his father's guts with a passion, and had long-since joined the school of thought that Mr. Swaney, besides having provided some of the DNA for Joshua's making, was no good at all. But, on the outside, he was cool as a cucumber, unfazed by the apparent dysfunctional nature of his family, taking it like a real man would take a snake-bite—and the others were eating it up. Well, Todd was, at any rate; he'd always been easy to entertain. Stevie, however, seemed put off a bit. He was no longer the center of attention.

Better luck next time, pal, Joshua thought, not unkindly. To him such competitive business was merely a sort of unofficial race for social dominance—a game.

He dug into his sandwich and juice box while relating the tale to his friends: "Christmas Eve, and my parents are going at it, right? It's the usual crap: My dad thinks we should open the presents at night because he wants to sleep in the next morning. My mom wants to do the morning thing because it's how her family has always done it, and it's supposed to be an experience for me and all. So they start yelling at each other—over *me*, like I'm still a little kid. Like I need this or that 'family experience' to grow up right when, the whole time, I'm just sitting there on the couch flipping through the TV channels. Then my mom starts ragging on my dad about how he's never around as much as he should be, and if he really doesn't like spending time with us he should just go—and so he grabs his jacket and says, 'Okay, I'm out of here,' and he slams the door on the way out." Taking another bite from his sandwich, Joshua chewed it halfway and then washed it down with a swallow of juice. "Me and Mom just high-fived each other and had pie, and she even said, 'Whatever, let's open the presents tonight!' after we were done." Another bite of ham and lettuce, another sip of juice. "It was the best Christmas ever."

The jam on Todd's lower lip was rapidly solidifying. He shook his head and offered his condolences once again.

Stevie seemed to ponder something for a moment. Then he smiled and said, "I got my brother's girlfriend to make out with me on New Year's."

Todd was incredulous now, and even Joshua had to admit to himself that he hadn't seen this coming. He'd been one-upped in a subliminal game of Who's

Holiday Was Better? because as momentous as it was to have just rid oneself of a flaky father, it still wasn't as big as when someone in the group got his first real chance at making out. Especially since, up until now, Joshua had always considered himself the most experienced when it came to girls.

"No way!" blurted Todd. "You mean Liz?"

"Yup," replied Stevie, nodding proudly. "My brother brought her over after this party, and they were all drunk and stuff. They wanted to knock boots on the couch, but I said I'd tell unless they paid me off. Neither of them had any money, so I told my brother I'd keep quiet if Liz let me get to second base with her—and she said yes!"

"No way!" blurted Todd (again).

Joshua scowled and shook his head. He could see the slight blush spreading across Stevie's face, and he knew it had nothing to do with supposedly admitting he'd gotten to second base with a college girl. First off, college girls didn't go for that kind of thing. Second, if it were true, Stevie wouldn't have been at all shy about it. "You're full of it. That's the plot of, like, a dozen of your dad's old porno videos."

"You weren't there," Stevie said. "You wouldn't know, anyway."

"I'd know," Joshua retorted, feeling his cheeks flame.

"How's that? You've only ever made it to *first* base."

"Plenty more times than you've ever actually *done it*," Joshua shot back. His own intensity surprised him, and he could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. It was as if he'd come to class without his math homework, only this had to do with the natural progression in which he'd expected himself to generally be "first." He was a looker. But Stevie already had a peach-fuzz mustache. That meant he was at the forefront of adolescence, while Todd and Joshua were still left guessing.

"*Quality*, not quantity," Stevie said. "I don't play the girls like you say you do, but when I get one..." He trailed off, made a face intended to convey refinement and maturity, though it was more the sort of face a politician might have made farting during a press conference.

"Why not both?" Joshua asked, waving his hand in the air. "I bet I could hook up with any girl out here before lunch is over."

"Okay," said Stevie, nodding at one of the other tables. "I'll make it easy for you. Hook up with the new girl."

Joshua glanced at the table Stevie was indicating. It was empty, save for a lone girl sitting with her shoulders hunched and her head buried in a paperback novel.

"You mean Kyna?" he asked after a moment.

"Sure," said Stevie.

Under the table, Todd snagged his foot. "Go on, dude."

Joshua swallowed and hoped his sudden apprehension wasn't too evident. Talking about girls and actually interacting with them were two different things—and Kyna Miller was one of those girls who stuck to her own world the whole time she was at school (unless she was talking to one of her teachers). She wasn't the kind of girl Joshua typically found himself pondering, romantically or otherwise,

even though he'd seen her around campus since the start of the semester. She wasn't much of an item: long, stringy blond hair, narrow, bony arms and legs, pale skin. Her only comely feature was her face, which she often kept tilted toward the ground whenever she walked between classes.

And now Stevie thinks because she's an introverted weirdo it's going to be easy to just go over there and talk her into going out with me...like she's just waiting for that to happen. Well, he doesn't know that much about girls, then.

"There's a certain process," Joshua began, in his most scholarly voice, but Todd and Stevie had already focused their attention on a growing bet that he couldn't get Kyna to be his girlfriend before the warning bell rang.

"Who cares?" said Todd. "Girls like Kyna need attention. You just *know* she's never been kissed. Probably never even talked to another guy besides her own dad."

"Yeah, go on, Mister Smooth," said Stevie. "Show us your magic and make her go out with you."

Joshua, though more than a little bit wary of Stevie's conscious intent to steer everyone's attention away from his make-out story, decided to play the game. As part of his pre-programmed set of moves, he resisted the urge to accept the challenge outright, and instead pretended to be either uninterested or shy each time another challenge came his way. *Can't just strut your stuff outright, because then you're conceited, and conceited guys always take crap from their friends whenever they screw up. Play it humble, though, stroke your ego quietly while your buddies pump you up, and they'll think they're puppeteering you for their own amusement when really, if it works,* you're *the one who gets to kiss the girl. Even if her name is Kyna Miller and she's Dale's biggest bookworm and she's not that cute to begin with... maybe she'll go out with you because she knows you're all she'll ever get.*

This could be a momentous occasion!

"But she's a total introvert," he said, after apparent consideration. "All she does is read books and keep to herself. She's got no interest in anyone."

"So?" chimed his friends, in unison.

So? he echoed, mentally. It wasn't, of course, that big of a big deal. Joshua was sure he knew exactly what girls wanted. If you were cute enough, confident enough, if you knew how to sweet-talk them, it didn't matter who they were or what they were into. You just had to know how to throw your mack like a pro.

Joshua cleared his throat and made his next move. "She's not into guys."

"How do you know?" Stevie asked.

"Because...well, just look at her."

"Because," Todd cooed, wagging his index finger in the air, "you can't do it."

"I could, if I wanted to."

"Then do it."

A few more of the standard challenges were flung his way, though he ignored them all as he planned his conquest. He was handsome, and he knew it; he often used this to his advantage, knowing that someday soon he would be an adult, and his boyish good looks would have blossomed into full-grown sex appeal. But now it was still a game, and he wanted practice.

When Todd finally put his lunch money on the line, Joshua took the bet and walked over to Kyna's table. She didn't look up until his shadow passed over her. When she did, she had a look of stone-cold apathy on her face.

"Hi," he said, flashing a sunny smile.

"What," she said, flatly. Not a question but a flat statement: *what*.

"Nothing," Joshua replied, immune to her acid-in-the-face social technique. He took the seat opposite hers. "I was just wondering what you were reading."

She looked down, snuggled closer to her book. "It wouldn't interest you."

"Sure it would."

"Get lost."

"I was just making friends."

"Well, go make friends with someone *else*. I'm busy."

Despite the growing heat at the back of his neck, Joshua remained seated and forced his lips to hold a smile. "You're new here."

Kyna lowered her book, glowered at him. "Uh-huh."

"You got Mr. Schall?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're so lucky. He lets you watch movies on Fridays, right?"

"Are you just going to sit there and ask stupid questions until lunch is over?"

Joshua made a point of shrugging nonchalantly. "I just thought you'd be interesting to talk to."

Kyna shook her head in apparent disgust and stuffed her book into her backpack. She stood, then, and pointed her finger accusingly at him. "You think I'm dumb? You think I was born yesterday? You're only talking to me because your friends put you up to it. A bet or something—or a joke. Mess with the weird geek girl and they'll give you props and you'll get off feeling like a big man because you made fun of me."

Joshua got up as well, grabbed Kyna's arm as she turned to leave. "Kyna, no," he said, and slipped his hand into hers. He didn't let go until she faced him once again. "It's not like that at all. They're just...my friends. Same old dumb jokes everyday, yeah. Talking without saying anything. But I saw you over here and I thought you'd be interesting to hang with. I thought you and I could *talk*, you know? Not just pretend we're having a good time trying to ignore the idiots."

She caught his gaze, bit her lower lip. Still defensive, but seeming to soften ever so slightly inside, she said, "You're joking."

"No, I'm not. I swear." He spread his hands, smiled again. "I...it's just...I've seen you around. I know you, um, don't have a lot of time to spend with friends. I've been wanting to say hi, but I didn't want to come on all pushy, or like I was hitting on you or something...you know?"

Kyna's demeanor softened further. She still seemed to be on guard, but he could tell he'd struck a chord somewhere deep down inside her. "You mean it?" she asked in a pointedly you-better-mean-it-or-else manner.

"Well, sure," Joshua replied, and nodded toward the cafeteria. "Let me prove it by buying you something from the snack window."

"I don't know..."

Puppy dog eyes. "Come on. Please?"

Kyna was finally rendered helpless. She smiled slightly. "Well...okay. But only so you'll quit your whining."

They left the table and made their way across the quad, Joshua resisting the urge to turn his head and stick his tongue out at Todd and Stevie. He couldn't help but notice Kyna was holding her head higher than usual, and she was actually *smiling*. Proud, no doubt, that she was actually going to spend her lunch with a friend, and a *boy*, at that. Sure, she was a little ratty, more skin and bone than he would have preferred, but she was also an unspoiled garden, an unopened Christmas present gone unnoticed by the other boys.

She'd do nicely.

* * *

Over the following weeks and months, Joshua's relationship with Kyna progressed from basic lunchtime chats to full-fledged conversations over the phone, after-school homework sessions, and, finally, illuminating make-out sessions held in her bedroom. Mrs. Miller (whom he discovered, much to Kyna's embarrassment, was a New Ager with an affinity for incense and Enya music) seemed to find him utterly adorable, and was charmed beyond reprieve on the occasions he walked Kyna home or offered to take her out to a movie.

Mr. Miller, for whatever reason, wasn't around much. When he was, there was tension. Joshua couldn't understand what it meant, and Kyna never offered to explain, so he mostly kept out of their business whenever he was over.

By April, he'd ditched Todd and Stevie almost entirely. Kyna provided all the friendship and tingly feelings he needed, and was far more interesting to talk to.

One day, when he was sitting with her in her bedroom and participating in a homework-turned-kissing-festival, he daringly slipped his hand up her shirt. For a moment it seemed the right thing to do—but suddenly she was breaking away, separating herself from him.

"I can't," she said, and cleared her throat as she fixed her hair, adjusted her shirt. Without further explanation she picked up her notebook and resumed her work.

Joshua sighed. *So close! Damn. Totally thought today was going to be the day...but there's no reason to rush it. Go too fast and she'll dump me, and then I'll have to start all over.*

He said, "I'm sorry, Kee. I didn't mean to."

She smiled at him briefly; he smiled back.

They finished their homework.

* * *

On the Friday following that first near-milestone, Stevie happened to announce, in passing, that there was going to be a make-out party Saturday

evening.

"At Andy's place," he said, winking. "He told me to invite whomever I wanted. Couples only."

Joshua had his arm around despite the school's untoward policy regarding public displays of affection. However, there were no teachers at this end of the hallway, and so he tightened his hold ever so slightly, gauging Kyna's reaction.

"I don't like parties," she said after Stevie had left.

"Aw," said Joshua. "It's not a big deal. I know Andy—it's just a party. Stevie makes it sound dirty because, well, he used to eat a lot of dirt when he was little. His brain's all gritty."

Kyna giggled. He could feel her relax, if only slightly. It reminded him of all the times they'd made out together and all the times he'd failed to get past first base. He saw other couples around school and couldn't help wondering how far they'd gotten with each other. Surely most of the other eighth-grade boys already knew what it was like to go all the way—how long did they have to wait before their girlfriends gave the go-ahead? He wanted the pop culture dating ideal more than anything else in the world—but he also wanted Kyna to have a good time. He wanted her to enjoy talking to people other than himself, wanted her to enjoy being social, because if she saw how other girls interacted with their boyfriends, she might be more willing to open herself up to him. Romantically, and as a friend.

So it doesn't look like I'm dating a prude.

Not that he was embarrassed at being seen with Kyna. She was an obvious introvert, the kind of girl who would never know boys or love unless she took what she could get. Joshua knew he could do better, if he really wanted to, but he also knew he could do a whole lot worse.

He spent the rest of the afternoon patiently pressing her. On the walk home, she finally agreed to go with him to Andy's party.

"You're awesome!" he declared, and pecked her on the cheek.

* * *

Joshua picked Kyna up at five-thirty. Mrs. Miller had been informed they were having dinner at his place, just as Mrs. Swaney thought they were having dinner with the Millers. Kyna emerged from her room wearing a knit shawl and camisole combo. It was quite an unexpected (but not unwelcome) departure from her usual jeans/sweatshirt ensemble.

"Whoa," he said, whistling. "Where'd this come from?"

Kyna shrugged, blushing. He could tell she'd been waiting to spring the outfit for a long time. "Just something I had lying around."

"Well, you look...awesome." *She must really be excited about this,* Joshua thought. *Her first boy-girl party, and she's showing some skin for a change. Still skinny as hell, but she doesn't look half bad this way.*

He could feel her trembling slightly as they made the journey, hand in hand, to Andy's house.

First time...first time. Tonight's going to be our first time!

When they arrived at Andy's, Joshua rang the doorbell and prepared a variety of appropriate greetings should Andy's parents be the ones to answer. Luckily Andy himself was available to let them in.

"Glad you could come," he said, leading them through a suspiciously empty and darkened living room. At first, Joshua thought they had arrived early, but then he heard the muffled music, and as they descended into the basement, he suddenly found himself in the presence of two-dozen friends and acquaintances from school. There was food, music, a pool table, a game console hooked up to an enormous flatscreen TV. There were no adults in sight.

Kyna linked her arm in Joshua's, pressed close, as if they'd suddenly walked into a zoo cage filled with uppity tigers.

"Relax," he said, somewhat disappointed to find that no one seemed to be making out just yet. "It's just a kickback, see? Look. There's Stevie. Let's go say hello."

With Kyna stuck to his shoulder, Joshua crossed the room, exchanging greetings with the more familiar of those in attendance. The general mood throughout was friendly, though more than a handful of the evenly-paired boys and girls gave Kyna a second glance.

Stevie was standing with his newly-acquired girlfriend, Clarissa, by a long table cluttered with several three-liter Coca Cola and Sprite bottles, an assortment of multi-colored plastic cups, and an opened tin of Altoids. He nodded at Joshua, smiled politely at Kyna. "So, how does it feel to be in with the big boys?"

"Shut up," Joshua replied, playfully jabbing at Stevie's shoulder. In all honesty, he was more than grateful to be here, but, of course, he was trying not to show it.

"You can thank me later for convincing Andy to let you come."

"Whatever. Say, Todd's not going to be here?"

Stevie rolled his eyes and made a masturbatory motion with his hand.

Joshua nodded. It was a given that Todd wasn't as bold with actual girls as he was with imaginary ones. Besides, he hadn't shown the slightest interest in securing a girlfriend this year; he seemed to have relegated himself (for the time being) to the fact that he was pink-faced and pudgy, and not the sort of boy who had an easy time drawing the ladies.

Joshua continued chatting with Stevie for the next few minutes, during which time Kyna was able to overcome part of her shyness as Clarissa offered her a drink. She left his side with a nervous smile on her face, though in a moment she was absorbed in a conversation at the other end of the table, and seemed to be having a good enough time of it.

Watching her go, Joshua nudged Stevie and gave him a full report on just how far he'd gotten over the past few months. "She's *this* close," he said, afterward, as he sipped soda and watched Kyna. "She just needs someone to tip her over the edge. I got it all worked out."

Stevie nodded approvingly.

Half an hour went by, and several more couples arrived to make the crowded

basement even more stifling. Joshua passed the time by mingling with the others, playing a little *Grand Theft Auto*, and patiently swallowing his anticipation.

At long last, Andy made his way toward the staircase, raised his voice above everyone else's and announced that he was going upstairs to check that his parents were still away. He promised that when he returned the *real* fun would begin.

There was a subtle shift in the room. Boys and girls rearranged themselves in and around the sofa pit and on the floor. Some were holding hands, others were giggling and whispering to each other. Heart hammering away in his chest, Joshua backed into a position on the fringes of the pit, and he felt someone brush up against him, felt a warm hand slip into his own. He turned and found Kyna was at his side. She looked nervous, like she wanted to say something, but things had become so quiet, so hesitant, she was undoubtedly afraid of being overheard.

Andy returned momentarily and made his way into the center of the pit. He grinned deviously as he announced that his parents were still out and weren't due home until midnight, and that the Make-Out Suite was open for business. He gestured toward one end of the room, and Joshua craned his head, noticed a large closet that had been arranged as a miniature bedroom.

"Each couple gets their fifteen minutes of fame. Pack out your trash when you're finished, and try to keep the noise to a minimum. Now...who wants to be first?"

A slight commotion arose. Several people called out names, others just giggled and cooed. Joshua felt Kyna pulling at him, silently urging him to move back away from the pit. In response, he gripped her hand firmly and charged forward as, from somewhere behind him, he heard Stevie and Clarissa chanting, "Go, Josh, go! Go, Josh, go!" In a moment, they were the center of attention.

Andy considered him. "Fifteen minutes enough for you two lovebirds?"

Joshua nodded and smiled, though Kyna had let go of his hand and was now glowering at him.

"No," she murmured, and started to pull away.

"Come on, Kee," he pleaded. For the first time that night his smile began to falter. She could turn him down in private, and he could deal with that, but here, in front of everyone else...if it got out that Joshua Swaney couldn't even get some from the school dweeb (and after going steady with her for almost a whole semester!), well, that would haunt him all through high school. Maybe even college beyond. It would label him as either too desperate to get a girl, or too much of a loser to keep one.

He held her tighter now, cupping her bottom and squeezing like he'd seen the high-schoolers do. "Kee—"

"*Stop it*," she snapped, this time disregarding social grace completely as she squirmed out of his grip and pushed through the crowd, stumbled off toward the snack table. For a moment everyone watched her go, then they all turned back to Joshua, their faces expectant, curious.

Damn! he thought, feeling as if he were twisting down hard inside his skin, trying to hide deeper in the recesses of his body. *Okay. So not everyone who comes to*

these parties gets action. It happens, but...aw, hell. Why is everyone looking at me like that? God, I'm going to die.

Fortunately, Andy knew how to keep the show rolling:

"Going once, going twice...all right! Who else wants their fifteen minutes of fame?"

Everyone cheered and started yelling out names again. Joshua bowed his head, stuffed his hands into his pockets and receded as another couple took center stage. He was at his boiling point, though he refused the childish urge to cry or stomp off angrily or do any of the other things his contemporaries no doubt expected him to do. Kyna was still at the snack table, holding herself, trying to catch his attention, trying to get the point across: *take me home*. They could talk it over, he supposed. He could apologize and make it up to her by being really sweet—sweet enough, maybe, to get some action in before the night was through.

Instead, he veered off toward the opposite end of the room. There was a game of Catch Phrase going, and he decided he'd rather have even the slightest bit of fun as opposed to an hour-long discussion with his girlfriend about relationships. As he settled in with one of the teams, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that Kyna was leaving, hurrying up the stairs. A few people passed him questioning glances, but, for the most part, everyone minded their own business.

During the next hour, several couples had their fifteen minutes of fame. Joshua found himself nearing the end of his patience, and was about to leave the party when another of the girls—dark-skinned, curly black hair, vaguely familiar face—came over to him.

"Hi," she said, smiling.

"Hi," he replied unenthusiastically.

"My name's Mya."

"Josh."

"Where's your girlfriend?"

He shrugged. "She went home, I guess. Not her thing."

"Aw, I'm sorry." Mya paused, looked over her shoulder, then back at him again. "Don't take this the wrong way, but...have you ever, you know...*shared* with a girl?"

Joshua sighed. *That's right, folks! Step right up and witness the pathetic virgin boy in all his unrequited glory! Cursed with a ripe cherry the likes of which no girl will ever know! Doomed to wander the borderlands for all eternity!* "No."

Mya took his hand. "Let's go for a walk, then."

* * *

They didn't go far. The laundry room upstairs was enough for Mya's purposes. Joshua stood leaning against the washing machine as she stepped in close, kissed him on the mouth. At first, he was nervous, thinking of what might happen if they got caught, thinking of what Kyna would do or say if she saw him here like this—but it was too late. He'd turned over complete control to his precocious hopes, his

petty wishes and dreams, his stubborn hormones.

He kissed Mya back.

Pulling away only momentarily, she smiled, looking pleased, as if he'd passed some sort of test. She leaned in again, capturing his lips once more—

—and bit down hard.

Hard enough to draw blood.

Hard enough that Joshua groaned outwardly, started to pull away. But it only hurt for a moment. Mya went right on kissing him, and he settled, becoming aware of a subtle euphoric warmth passing between them, an ebb and flow of togetherness and joy and all things bright and beautiful. The two of them were fully-clothed and yet sharing an intimacy that was immeasurable, incomprehensible, unlike anything Joshua had ever experienced.

This wasn't the sexual conquest he'd been after.

It was *way* better.

Chapter 31

Night shifted past, the Earth rotated beneath him, and in a time lapse memory Joshua found himself waking up the morning after with a roaring headache and a slight fever. He got out of bed and systematically recalled, with a fair amount of pride, the events preceding last night's encounter in the bushes outside Andy's house: what he ate, what he drank—had anyone sneezed on him?

It wasn't until he was showering that he began wondering about STDs. He hadn't had sex with Mya, they hadn't even taken their clothes off. However, they *had* shared blood. For a split second Joshua was alarmed that he might have exposed himself unnecessarily—but then he recalled various school lessons concerning incubation periods for flu, colds, and the like, and he convinced himself that anything he had now was probably something he'd picked up last week, not last night.

After his shower, he nevertheless stood in front of the mirror and checked his mouth for giant, gaping cold sores and mutant pustules. Finding neither, he relaxed somewhat, though the symptoms grew considerably worse by the time he stumbled out into the kitchen for breakfast.

His mother was there, scrambling some eggs. "How's the lip?" she asked over her shoulder.

That's right, Joshua thought as he slid into a chair and sat slumped, rolling his tongue over the salty-dry roof of his mouth. *Told her I'd bitten my lip on accident at dinner last night. And here I'd thought that was the end of the world.* "It's fine."

Hearing the hoarseness in his voice, Mrs. Swaney left the stove and came to his side. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I woke up like this." In actuality, he'd awoken feeling merely wretched; now he was absolutely abysmal.

Mrs. Swaney placed her hand against his forehead and whistled. "You're burning up, kiddo. There's probably something going around at school."

"Probably," Joshua said, and shrugged away, as he always did whenever his mother called him "kiddo." A moment ago he'd been almost hysterical, in need of a little motherly attention. Now that he had it, he was back to his old, autonomous self. "Do we have any orange juice?"

Mrs. Swaney nodded, and told him she'd pour him some, but he had to go lie down first. So he sighed and returned to his room, where he settled into bed, his body aching, his blood boiling. As he closed his eyes, he was able to stave off most of his discomfort by going over his memories from last night—sweet, searing memories of himself and Mya in Andy's laundry room. Whatever annoying bug

he'd happened to pick up, it couldn't detract from the fact that last night had been the best night of his entire life.

The orange juice forgotten, he dozed off.

* * *

On Monday, he stayed home from school to recuperate. When, three days later, his condition worsened to the point where he was almost unable to get out of bed at all, his mother took him—*carried* him—to see the doctor, who could find nothing physically wrong. His bloodwork was fine. Yet here he was, overrun with fever, aching from head to toe with some unknown ailment.

Something was wrong.

The doctor asked him about his diet, his exercise and sleep habits. In these areas, he was a typical thirteen-year-old, and he should have been healthy as a horse. Indeed, last week he *was* the model thirteen-year-old. Of course, he hadn't yet made a habit of swapping bodily fluids with girls he hardly knew, and it dawned on him, as he sat shivering miserably on the x-ray table, that he'd made a terrible mistake in allowing his hormones (and his ego) to get the best of him at Andy's party. What other explanation was there?

During a string of inconclusive doctor visits, he considered divulging his blood swap with Mya. However, his pride hadn't yet been totally defeated, and so he chose silence, the preservation of his mother's faith in him as a savvy young man over the certain embarrassment and shame of admitting his own irresponsibilities.

Medically, there was nothing wrong with him. Vitamins, fresh air, and bed rest were prescribed until further test results could be analyzed. At the end of the first week, Joshua insisted that he felt a little better because he couldn't stand to see his mother worry, and he couldn't stand knowing how much the blood tests and laboratory work cost without medical insurance.

The second week of his illness offered little improvement. By now he'd adjusted slightly to the nagging drag within himself—as if all the biological motors of his body were struggling just to turn over—but he still had a long way to go before actually feeling better.

On Wednesday morning, he found himself back at Dale and standing in front of his locker again. His time out of school had set him back, set him apart from the collective consciousness; he wasn't sure which textbooks he usually kept and which ones he left. He ended up compromising, to the best of his recollection, and left for the quad.

Sniffling and swollen, he stepped between the other students as if he were making his way through Bangkok. His friends and acquaintances were likewise alienated; they seemed to view him as they would an outsider. Their looks expressed wonder, curiosity, and fear concerning his absence, as well as his rapidly-deteriorated appearance. When he wasn't able to find Todd or Stevie, who most likely hadn't yet arrived on campus, he decided to search for Mya instead (lest he risk sitting down somewhere and not being able to get back up again).

At a quarter to eight, there wasn't much time to snoop around—but then again, what were the odds of him being able to make it through an entire school day in his present state? No, the real reason he'd forcibly convinced his mother to let him get out of bed this morning was so that he could get some answers. Tardiness would be dealt with later.

There was a small gathering of trees between the parking lot and easternmost portables. Mya and several of her friends were sitting on the grass and working on their homework when he found them.

"Mya," he said, his voice quavering. "We need to talk."

Mya looked up, passed him an annoyed look—sans any sort of concern for his obvious physical state. "Not now, Josh." She looked back down at her notebook.

"*We need to talk*," he repeated. He'd spew it all out right now, in front of her friends, if need be.

"Fine," she said after a moment, and rose from the group, walked with him a ways down the sidewalk to where they were relatively out of earshot. "What do you want?"

He spread his arms and coughed inadvertently. "Look at me. What do you think?"

"Are you sick or something?"

"*Or something*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I got like this the morning after we made out."

Mya snorted, finally catching onto Joshua's insinuation. "You had a rough ride. So?"

"You did this to me."

"Oh, boo-hoo. No one *did* anything to you. You *wanted* it, remember?"

"Not like this. I can't sleep, I can't stay awake, I can't eat—I always feel like my heart's going to just stop. You gave me something, Mya."

She scowled and folded her arms. "You want the prize, you take the risk. Fact of life, Junior. What do you want me to do about it?"

Joshua caught his tongue. He wasn't sure what he wanted from her, wasn't sure what he'd expected in coming here. An apology? A magical elixir to cure what ailed him? A time machine, perhaps? Some sort of cosmic burp that he could utilize to reverse the events of the previous weekend so that he'd never set foot in Andy's house?

"I don't know," he said, at last.

Mya sighed impatiently and glanced across the way at her friends. "Look, Josh. I shared with you. I don't even like you, but I shared with you anyway. You know you wouldn't have left the party unless you got some. That's why you stayed when your girlfriend left. Well, you got what you wanted, so now you have to deal with the consequences."

"You should've told me first."

"And you should've known better."

"So should you—"

"I'm not going to stand here all day arguing with you. If it hadn't been me it would have been some other girl. We all get it eventually."

"Is this some STD, like they teach us in health class?"

"Sort of, I guess." Mya sighed. "I'm not an expert. I don't think anyone is. Whatever it is that makes you wake up the next morning feeling like garbage, that's what's coursing through your system right now. It's not anything you can cure by going to the doctor, but it's not all bad. It has its benefits, and if you can keep it under control, there are things you can do that, well..." She raised her hand, and a funny thing happened: With a mere twitch of the eye, she somehow willed Joshua's hand into hers, as if she'd attached an invisible cord to his wrist and yanked. Once their fingers were locked together, she squeezed hard, digging one of her fingernails into his knuckle.

"Ow!" he started, but she caught him with a cautionary gaze, somehow forced herself into him so that he was suddenly frozen solid, his breath caught at the back of his throat. She dug deeper, drawing blood; then she held his hand up to his mouth.

"Taste," she instructed.

Under her command, he brought his bloodied knuckle to his lips, swabbed the salty wound with his tongue—and felt himself shiver from head to toe. His extremities tingled, and somewhere deep down inside a knot loosened, an iron fist eased its grip on his lungs. Suddenly he was able to breathe easier, he was able to stand straighter; for the first time in two weeks he felt slightly better.

"That'll hold you over for a while," Mya said, letting him go. "It's sort of a fake-out. But you'll need to get *qi* from someone else eventually. You can deal with that however you like. Just don't talk to me ever again. We're not friends, we never will be."

She left him, then, standing there at the edge of the parking lot, his fist stuffed into his mouth as he suckled eagerly from a newly-discovered fountain of life and mulled over an unfolding revelation.

* * *

A bedroom mutilation session, performed later in the afternoon, confirmed Mya's story. Recycling his own blood, as unpleasant as it was at first, actually worked. It wasn't anything like when he'd shared with Mya, but he was able to stave off the worst part of what was affecting him—though there was still an underlying ache.

He tried moving inanimate objects with his mind as well, sitting at the edge of his bed and staring intently at a battle-scarred basketball he'd unearthed from the back of his closet. Mya had said there were benefits to being sick; somehow you became weaker in one sense, and stronger in another.

Able to move a person's arm without his thinking about it, at least, he thought, and concentrated harder on the basketball, to no avail.

That evening, when his mother came home from work and found him, eating a

bowl of cereal and lounging in front of the television (instead of lying prostrate in his bed), she dropped her bag and rushed to him. She hugged him close and muttered a prayer of thanks to whatever divine intermediary had restored his vitality. He merely attributed it to the vitamins.

* * *

The next morning, Joshua began completely anew. He made the walk to school with a sparkle in his eye and a swagger in his step as he went over the details in his mind: First, he'd apologize to Kyna, tell her how sorry he was about being a jackass at Andy's party. He'd offer her the handmade friendship bracelet he carried in his pocket, and he'd beg her forgiveness with a look of such innocence on his face that she'd melt instantly into his arms because, after all, he was the only boy in the entire school who paid any attention to her.

She'd never give up a good thing like this, he thought, *because I'm all she's ever had.*

Never mind that they hadn't spoken in almost two weeks. He needed her to need him. More than ever, now that he'd done what he'd done with Mya. Rumors would almost certainly spread, and he would soon be branded as unclean, one of those boys who, good looks or not, had mismanaged his love life early on and paid the penalty. His friends and prospective girlfriends wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole because they'd all know the story.

Kyna was his only other option besides prostituting himself on some street corner. She was a loner, apart from all the schoolyard cliques where incriminating information was passed around. If he could charm her well enough, and do it right this time, he'd be able to benefit from the steady inflow of her blood...and other benefits as well.

No problem with that, he thought. *Sticking to just one girl for life. Doesn't matter if she's not my dream girl. If Kee's mine, I'll always have a backup plan. I won't need anyone else. And isn't that what love is, anyway? Sticking together. Thick and thin? She'll understand. She's that sort of person.*

Fetching his things from his locker, he went outside for lunch. Kyna was nowhere to be found.

Todd and Stevie were waiting outside one of their classrooms, and they approached him immediately when they saw him.

"Whoa, dude!" Todd blurted, evidently taken aback by his appearance. "Where've you been all this time?"

Joshua shrugged, aware that there were dark circles under his eyes, aware that he'd lost a couple of pounds—aware that it took more than a little effort to ignore his friends' reactions. "Caught the flu. Had to kick it in bed for a while. You guys seen Kee?"

"No," Stevie replied. "She hasn't been at school since the party. With both of you leaving Andy's so early, I thought maybe you'd gotten into trouble or something."

"Yeah," Todd added, glaring at Stevie. "The party *I* wasn't invited to."

"Shut up, fool," Stevie retorted. "You would've asked to go home after all the potato chips were gone, anyway."

"It's the thought that counts."

The boys began an impromptu argument. Joshua furrowed his brow and recalled how Kyna had indeed left early on the night of Andy's party. He'd been too involved with socializing—too involved with Mya—to really give thought to the matter, but he supposed Kyna must have walked home alone. Considering this, his heart missed a beat.

What if she got jumped or raped or something?

She lived in the ghetto. What if he hadn't been there the one time she'd needed him most, the one time some pervert decided to have his way with the skinny, out-of-place white girl who was too introverted to even scream when she needed help—what if?

* * *

Kyna was absent for the rest of the day. During lunch, Joshua hung out with Todd and Stevie and pondered what it would be like to tap them. Surely they'd turn him down, though with every passing moment he found himself teetering on springing the question. More troubling was the not-knowing, the fear that, should he be unsuccessful in wooing Kyna back indefinitely, he really had no alternative but to scavenge the streets, to solicit total strangers—to steal the lifeblood of people whose lives meant absolutely nothing to him.

To truly be alone.

* * *

He walked to Kyna's house after school, knocked on the door and waited. Momentarily, Mrs. Miller answered.

"Hello, Joshua," she said, her voice flecked with grit. She looked more haggard than usual. "What can I do for you?"

He swallowed. "I just wanted to check up on Kyna. Is she home?"

"I'm sorry, baby," Mrs. Miller replied, frowning. "She's, um, not feeling well. She's sleeping right now. I wouldn't want to wake her." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Who's at the door?" someone called from inside—Mr. Miller, Joshua realized.

"I'm sorry, hon," Mrs. Miller said, stepping back so she could close the door.

Before she did, Joshua quickly said, "Tell her I came by—tell her I hope she feels better soon."

"Okay, baby."

He retreated into the ghetto, heading homeward. *She knows,* he thought, and kicked at a crumpled beer can. *Kee told her what happened at the party and now she thinks I'm an asshole—now I'm off-limits, out of her life. God, what am I going to*

do?

* * *

The following day was as cheerful as a funeral. Joshua hardly spoke at all to Todd and Stevie, as he found his brain in a repetitive cycle, trying to solve a problem he knew was impossible to solve unless he gave up all his moral values.

I'd have to be pretty desperate to start tapping strangers, he thought bitterly as he entered the boys' restroom, *even though I'm hungry enough to do it.* He would have spent the remainder of the lunch hour in one of the stalls, had all the doors not been taken down.

Outside, he wandered the campus in search of a place private enough to allow for a quick self-recycling session. Everywhere he looked, however, there was a constant cacophony of people. Too many teachers, too many students—too many bodies in motion, walking around in clusters, sitting in lines along chain link fences, at tables, with ham and cheese and peanut butter and jelly sticking to teeth, slurring laughter—*kids!* he thought, wiping the sweat from his face. *Little damned brats, all of them! Taking up too much space, not leaving anything unseen or untouched! I can't eat because they're always watching me, keeping tabs on everywhere I go, everything I do! They don't understand what's it's like to be stuck like this, so hungry and no one understands—*

He stopped when he reached the library, which, he remembered, had a restroom with a door on the stall. Suppressing a shout of joy, he made for the entrance—and unexpectedly spotted Kyna, her arms wrapped tightly around a bundle of textbooks, walking quickly toward the double doors. She looked even skinnier than before, her hair now more the color of ash rather than wheat, but he'd be damned if she hadn't just brightened his entire day.

He ran to her, stopped her before she could enter the building.

"Hi," he said with a clumsy smile. She moved to pull away from him, but he held her firmly as he retrieved the friendship bracelet from his pocket. "I made this for you." He held it up. "I was such a jerk at Andy's...I couldn't forgive myself if I knew I'd hurt you. I want us to stay friends, Kee. Forever."

Kyna looked hard at him, no doubt seeing the telltale circles under his eyes. She seemed to search him, studying—missing what she was looking for. She said, "Leave me alone," and pulled away.

He let her go, watched as she disappeared into the library. His instinct was to follow her, to plead for her forgiveness until she caved in, but doing so now only meant creating a scene and possibly getting in trouble, so he stuffed the bracelet back into his pocket and reverted to Plan B: the restroom stall.

By three o'clock Joshua was waning. Expectation, combined with the symptoms of a hunger not-quite-satisfied, had him anxious and aching. He was crossing the street, heading for home, when he heard Kyna calling out to him. He turned and saw her standing tentatively at the edge of the campus lawn, as if she were facing rushing water instead of ordinary asphalt.

"Can you see me home?" she asked.

She was crying.

The walk was long enough for her to explain most of what had happened since the party. At first Joshua expected it to be trivial—her usual morose persona in need of scheduled maintenance—but when she mentioned the words "father" and "abuse" in the same sentence, when she told him how she'd gone home from the party that Saturday evening to find Mr. Miller, drunk and belligerent, waiting for her...he almost burst into tears.

"I...it's m-my fault," he stammered, trying to hold her, trying to be the support she so badly needed at the moment. "If I hadn't s-stayed, if I'd walked you home, m-maybe—"

Kyna put her hand in his. "It's not your fault. I'm not telling you this because I want to blame you. It's just...I have no one else to talk to, Josh."

Maybe another boy would have recoiled at such a confession, but not Joshua, not after what he himself had experienced recently, and not when the listening and comforting meant the possibility of a rekindled friendship.

Kyna cried some more as he held his arms around her and took her to his mother's house. Mrs. Swaney was at work; they had the place to themselves. Joshua settled Kyna on the living room sofa and went into the kitchen to fetch something for the both of them to drink. He was pondering how to tastefully approach her with a certain question regarding their relationship when, as he handed her a glass filled with iced tea, she answered it (quite unexpectedly) for him:

"I need to tell you something," she said, taking a sip and then solemnly holding the glass in her lap.

Joshua nodded. "Okay."

"My dad...he didn't rape me or anything like that. He's...hit me before, but he never *beat* me. Not like this. He never *cut* me..." She trailed off, shuddering, her eyes welling up. She didn't cry this time, though. "After...after he did what he did to me, I got real sick. I can't explain it. I was too weak to get out of bed, even, and I thought I was going to die. My mom didn't know what to do—she hates doctors, so she just kept me home from school and tried to get me to eat fruits and vegetables, and to drink juices and herb teas. I kept getting worse and worse until *he* came by again, and he..." She trailed off, biting her lip, gazing into the distance as she remembered. "It's like an addiction. I feel hungry all the time. I have to have it or else I get sick again."

She looked up at him, her face flushed, and suddenly Joshua had it: a way to make everything right, if she accepted. She didn't even have to know about his own bout with the unnameable ailment they'd both obviously contracted—she'd merely think he was being valiant by offering himself to her. *And I don't have to worry about transmitting it to her because she's already been infected!* Even if it was her own father who'd done it through a grotesque act of abuse, Joshua was too famished, too close to getting what he wanted to be put off by his moral compass.

"*It*," he said, playing dumb. "You mean...?"

Kyna looked away, took a long, uncomfortable moment to get the words out.

"He...he makes me drink his...his...blood." She started sobbing again. "It makes all the pain go away. He calls it *sharing*. He says the only way to keep from getting sick is for us to *share* with each other—I hate it. I hate *him*. What am I going to do? Who am I going to tell? My mom's too worked up over it all—she drinks all the time now, she's missed so much work. If I call the police...I-I don't want to go to an orphanage or be put away in a mental hospital. Then there'd be no one to take care of her, and oh, Josh..." She tucked into Joshua's embrace, crying hard.

It was a nightmarish predicament. Joshua couldn't imagine what it was like to be forced into such a situation, and on the one hand he was inclined to comfort Kyna and offer his unflinching support—but on the other, he was aching with a need that grew more insistent with each heartbeat, and he knew Kyna felt it, too. She was vulnerable, yes, but so was he—and if neither of them got what they needed from each other, it would be a grim life, for sure.

We can make it better, he told himself. Clearing his throat, he said, "Well, first off, your dad's lying. I've, um, read about this."

Kyna lifted her head, looked genuinely surprised. "You have?"

"Yeah. On the Internet. Health sites and stuff. I forget the scientific name. But they say it can be *anyone's* blood."

"Oh." Kyna looked away again, grossed out...considering.

Joshua said, "Kee, he has no control over you. He just wants you to *think* you need him so he can get what he wants. Anyone can give you their blood..." *Here we go.* "...even me."

His offer seemed to affect Kyna in such a way that she almost dropped her glass. He reached out and steadied it, then placed his hands on hers and waited patiently for her to accept or reject his offer. She started to shake her head, but he could see the hunger in her eyes, feel the aching need for what he was offering.

"Please, Kee," he whispered, imitating the desperation of a thousand impassioned film stars. "I don't want you to go through this alone. I've been doing some real hard thinking. There's no one else I'd rather be with."

She looked up at him, no doubt searching for the brave, fearless man hiding behind the boy's eyes.

Still undecided, but open to the possibilities.

"Wait here," he said, and he left her momentarily, went to his bedroom, where he found a clean pushpin. He returned to the living room, knelt before her and pricked his index finger.

"Here," he said, offering his hand to her. "Taste."

She squirmed. "Josh, no—"

"Please, Kee. I want to help you. That's why we're friends: to help each other."

When she failed to respond, he raised his finger and gently dabbed at her mouth with his blood. To his delight, she licked her thin, cracked lips, suckled at his fingertip. It stung at first, but seeing the expression on her face as she fed, as whatever gluttonous flow pulsing through her veins slowly became satisfied, he could feel a warmth surrounding him, and he knew she felt it, too. More than just a simple exchange of metaphysical microbes, it was an intimate moment—better

than what he'd experienced with Mya, for he *knew* Kyna; there was a connection here that ran alongside the sharing.

She was shaking afterward, but her eyes were brighter, her posture straighter. He could tell she wanted more, but was too shy to ask. He told her she could have him, that they could belong to each other exclusively, and for as long as they wanted. They would never need to depend on anyone else ever again.

Ultimately, she gave in, and he took her back to his bedroom, locked the door for privacy. Mrs. Swaney wouldn't be home for another hour.

It was more than enough time to share.

* * *

They officially became a couple. This, of course, meant matching friendship bracelets, bragging rights, and daily "shares" held after school in Joshua's bedroom. Following this regime, Joshua's physical state (Kyna's, too) quickly regained its former ardor. His mother, catching him one day in passing, commented that he looked better than ever—no more skin and bone. She also mentioned that his "little girlfriend" seemed healthier, too.

"We're just *friends*, Mom," he groaned. Though he knew Kyna and himself were much, much more than just friends, he played the relationship down, and restricted their meetings to that brief daily window of opportunity between three and five o'clock. It would do no good to have his mom discover (and likely discontinue) her son's after-school blood-for-blood arrangement and get herself overly worked up about something she couldn't possibly understand.

Scarring and infection were a concern. Joshua and Kyna took a risk every time they bled themselves. It was, considering the circumstance, an acceptable risk—and Joshua figured the arrangement was far less dangerous than if he'd decided to get his fix from random strangers on the street.

Sharing wasn't the only thing Joshua and Kyna did together. On some days neither he nor she felt the need to tap each other. Instead, they practiced what Kyna called "mind magic." Her mother had a small collection of New Age books on the subject. Joshua put two and two together and concluded that mind magic was what Mya had used to influence him at Andy's party and again on the morning of their revelatory conversation in front of Dale. He never told Kyna about Mya, though he was quite interested in developing his own malnourished abilities. Once again citing the Internet as a reputable source, he remembered what Mya had told him and explained that people infected after sharing often showed an enhanced ability to perform mind magic.

They didn't have much luck with it at first. Then, on one particular afternoon, Joshua was sure he saw Kyna move a penny with nothing more than a wave of her hand. She seemed embarrassed about this, though, and refused to replicate the trick.

Their relationship reached a crescendo with the shift into summer, when Joshua and Kyna were miraculously released from the eighth grade. With more free

time to spend together, they shared themselves often, and for longer periods of time. If Joshua knew his mother was going out for a while, he invited Kyna over; if Mrs. Swaney took them to the movies, to the park, or to the beach, they arranged it so that they met up in the restroom at the same time, or behind a clump of bushes —anywhere a moment's privacy allowed them access to each other.

During the longer sessions, they often experimented with varying degrees of overindulgence. Initially, the exchanges were within the boundaries of reason, snacking on each other rather than gorging, as it were. But sometimes Joshua would become almost intoxicated partaking of Kyna's essence, and would find himself nibbling on this or that part of her body, breaking the skin with his teeth. Kyna wasn't overtly alarmed by this. She always told him she trusted him. The problem was, Joshua's own boundaries inevitably became blurred, and eventually they disappeared altogether. Nibbling became biting, and soon biting became self-mutilation.

It didn't occur to him that things might be getting out of hand until he started wearing long-sleeved shirts, rain or shine, to cover the wounds on his arms. He even started doing his own laundry, insisting that his mother stay out of his room so she wouldn't see the stains on the sheets. Once, he even yelled at her for accidentally entering without knocking, and that's when it occurred to him that too much of a good thing, well, might not have been a good thing.

This became frighteningly evident one afternoon when Mrs. Swaney left him home alone while she ran errands. The moment she pulled out of the driveway, Joshua phoned Kyna. When no one answered, he slipped on his shoes and ran all the way to her house. He knocked, called out her name as he tried the door. It was open, so he let himself inside. The downstairs area was still; Mrs. Miller, usually sprawled on the living room couch, was nowhere to be found.

Still at work, he hoped, starting up the stairs. A thrill ran through him as he considered the possibility he and Kyna could spend some time alone together (Mrs. Miller never came upstairs—that was Kyna's territory), and he called out her name again as he turned down the hallway, into her bedroom—

—and there she was, sitting half-dressed at the edge of her bed, gazing down at herself. Her arms, her chest and belly, her thighs and legs—almost every inch of her body was marred by scars, some healed over, others barely clotting. Many still leaked blood.

He stumbled past the threshold, stopped a few steps in. She looked up at him, tears streaking her face. Her lips were stained red.

Did I do this to her? he wondered, suddenly chilled by the realization that he *had*; he simply didn't want to remember the times when he'd gone over the edge, allowed his hunger to run rampant. She'd trusted him—trusted *herself*—to stay within reason. Now it was too late to ignore the fact that the both of them were out of control.

"I get so hungry sometimes," Kyna said. "I can't help myself." She held out her arms for him to see. "Josh...look at me. I'm a monster."

He forced himself to take a few more steps into the room. "No...no you're

not." He sat beside her on the bed, took her hands in his own. He couldn't stand to look at her wounds, so he concentrated on the carpet as he spoke superficial words of love and encouragement—subliminal justification for what he'd done to her, what he'd taught her to do to *herself* for gratification.

"It's just...I can't take it sometimes," she said, sobbing. "I have to come home every day after school, and he's always here, yelling at my mom or throwing things. Sometimes he just looks at me and licks his lips, like he's thinking of how he tapped me and how he wants to do it again. I can't help myself. I come here to my room and I cut myself and I drink as much as I can...enough to take me away, Josh. Enough to make me feel so good I don't care about a single thing in the whole world...but it always goes away. I always come back."

Yeah, thought Joshua, wistfully. *We always have to come back, don't we?* He wanted to just sigh and give in, share his own emotional fallacies so that he could be miserable with her, the two of them together. He wanted to believe that maybe they could discuss their dilemma and come to a rational conclusion—but instead he only felt that familiar twitch in his gut, that steady burn in his blood.

Leaning in close, he tried to kiss Kyna in an attempt to affect an acceptable distraction.

She squirmed away. "No, Josh."

"Kee—"

"Please. I...I want to be alone."

He put his arm around her. "You don't understand. We can't just give up. I need you. More than ever. We need each other, don't you see? Together we can be happy, we don't need anyone else." He tried to kiss her again—

"Get away!" she screamed suddenly, and stood up on trembling legs.

Joshua got to his feet. "Aw, Kee! Don't do this! Not now!" His mind was racing: If he left now, without her blood, how long would it be before they next saw each other? How long would it take her to calm down enough so that they could share again? If he didn't somehow fix this, how long would he have to wait?

"Kee," he said, stepping toward her and reaching into his pocket as his mind decided itself for him. His fingers brushed the handle of his switchblade. "You don't understand. It's not our fault. We need each other, we need this." *And I'd be a fool to leave empty-handed. This is survival—it's not my fault if she can't handle it. I'm not going to start looking for partners in the wild.*

Kyna kept her back to him. He stepped behind her, reached out and touched her neck—at which point she whirled around to face him—and that's when he did it. Without even knowing, without even thinking, he jammed his switchblade into her abdomen. She screamed, fell backward; he caught her midway and lowered her onto the bed as she gasped and convulsed, trying to sit up. He held her down as he lifted her shirt and buried his face in the wound.

By the time he realized what he was doing, it was already too late. Trembling, choking—sick to the stomach, he lurched away from the bed and stumbled out into the hallway. He squinted through a veil of hot, acidic tears as he searched almost blindly for the staircase. His gut clenched and his soul twisted in on itself

with every step.

God, what did I just do?

* * *

Joshua fully expected his life to end that afternoon. He went home, cleaned himself up a bit, and then sat at the edge of his bed, waiting. No one came for him. Not the police, not Kyna's parents. He tried to fathom why this was, why he was being let off when he should be on his way to juvenile hall, and he could only come up with the explanation that maybe he hadn't cut Kyna too deep. Maybe he'd imagined it all, even. He *was* sick, after all; sometimes the piercing hunger alone was enough to make him delirious, see things that weren't there.

The bloodstains on his clothes, however, were quite real. He was almost certain he'd killed Kyna, and he couldn't imagine a world where something as horrendous as that was allowed, either by the local authorities or by God—and yet evening fell without incident. Mrs. Swaney returned home and busied herself in the kitchen, preparing dinner as if nothing were wrong.

With hours to go before bedtime, Joshua slowly peeled off the blood-encrusted layers of his clothing like layers of extra skin, flakes of weatherbeaten bark, rusted armor off a tender, sweaty body—the mussel out of its shell. He stuffed the soiled garments at the bottom of the hamper and shifted into bed, settling himself between the sheets and falling asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

* * *

Days passed, then weeks, and summer eventually wound itself down. Kyna never came around, and Joshua never followed up on her condition (optimism convinced him that she could possibly still be alive, though at this point he was too afraid to find out, one way or the other).

The weekend before high school started, he fell ill. Despite having leeched mightily off Kyna, despite recycling his own blood on a routine basis, his body knew the difference, and the baseline of his condition gradually slumped. He awoke on Saturday morning in a cold sweat and knew his reserves had been depleted.

You know what this means, he thought bitterly, and rolled out of bed, threw on some clothes.

He told his mother he was going over to Todd's to play video games. Instead, he wandered eastward, to Brookhurst street. From there he went south, passing liquor stores and bars. He found a homeless man shuffling across the empty parking lot behind a run-down pawn shop. Hungry enough not to care about disease or the smell, he jumped the man, knocked him to the ground, slashed his neck, growling animal-like as he fastened his mouth to the wound and swallowed down every last drop. Then, grabbing the man's wallet, he stumbled, tingling and twitching, up the street again.

Grotesquely satisfied, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and held his head low as he made his way home. No police arrested him, no half-dead zombie, spurting blood all over the sidewalk, staggered after him demanding its wallet back. As humiliating, as absolutely disgusting as the whole ordeal had been, he'd gotten what he needed. He'd taken care of business.

He could handle his life without Kyna.

He could survive.

Chapter 32

Joshua's freshman year began, and he attended his classes with a newly entrepreneurial outlook on the students with whom he interacted. Making friends was no longer a pleasantry. Rather, it was like recruitment each time around: How likely is it so-and-so would be cool with sharing? Are they likely to blab to too many of their friends afterward? Will they cling too tightly when it's time to move on?

Using mind magic, he was able to cajole a fair number of his peers into spending their lunch periods with him in the restroom, or behind the bleachers. Some of his new "friends" hung around long enough for multiple blood exchanges, others faltered after their first time and called off any further interactions. Overall, though, he had a growing reputation, which meant that those who were curious about sharing often got indirectly referred to him. It wasn't the ideal solution, but it meant a steady stream of patrons—and if he had to choose between living the life of a closet vampire and being a sickly bedbug, enduring the nightly sweats and searing pangs of withdrawal, the former was undoubtedly more preferable than the latter.

His relative luck with tapping didn't mean there weren't problems. Once word of his somewhat blatant sharing habits got around, the bullies started in with various taunts and pranks. Many thought it was a sexual thing. They accused him of ogling other guys in the locker room. Between classes, he had offensive letters taped to his back and rotten cafeteria leftovers slipped into his locker. Even Todd and Stevie became disenfranchised once they heard the rumors, and they stopped hanging out with him entirely by early October. He spent his fourteenth birthday watching movies at home with his mother. Explanations were useless, and only tended to get him in deeper trouble. It didn't matter to anyone what his true motivations were. All he knew was that he was driven to feed, and that it didn't matter so much how he satisfied himself as long as he did it routinely enough to keep the symptoms away. Certainly, he was, in a sense, more miserable now than he'd been at the start—but he wasn't hungry. He took every day as it came, took every emotional (and sometimes physical) blow with as much dignity as he could muster.

In the middle of it all, Kyna decided to reappear.

It was a Monday morning, the week before Halloween. He was sitting alone at one end of the Savanna quad, notebook propped in one hand as he went over his homework. He happened to look up at just the right moment and caught her crossing the blacktop, and he couldn't help but stop and stare, delayed recognition

slowly sinking in. Though he was relieved to see her, to finally know that she was alive and well, he was perplexed as to her physical condition. Gone was the skinny, sickly-looking bookworm he'd once approached during a lunchtime interlude at the opposite end of a seemingly eternal year. In her place was a strong, self-assured punker dressed in leggings and a denim jacket and bearing the swagger of someone who'd found her place in life early on. With her newly wiry frame and closely-cropped haircut, she could have passed for a boy, striding proudly up to the food wagon, paying for a bottle of spring water, and leaning coolly against the side of a breezeway support beam as she sipped.

Inevitably, her wandering gaze fell on him, and he felt an instant heat rise just beneath his skin.

Hello, Joshua, he could almost hear her say, and she didn't take her eyes off him as he got to his feet, walked over to where she was standing.

"Hey," he said, unsure if he'd come to apologize, gawk, or both.

"Hey," she echoed, taking another sip from her water bottle. For a moment she just stared at him, her face devoid of any sort of emotion (besides a slight twinge of annoyance), and he feared he'd mistaken someone else for Kyna—but he knew it was her. Same face, same eyes; it was just her body that had been carefully refined and tuned.

"So," she said at last, sizing him up as if considering a train wreck. "I hear you've become quite the *lush*."

Joshua felt his tongue catch. "I'm...managing. How about you?"

"I'm good." She took another sip from her bottle and looked the other way. "Where are your friends?"

"Doing their own thing, I guess," he replied.

"Too bad. I guess not everyone *shares*."

Again, Kyna's contempt bubbled to the surface, and Joshua had to make a conscious effort not to respond similarly with an insult of his own. He supposed part of the reason he was allowing himself to be verbally abused like this was because, deep down inside, he'd felt a faint glimmer of hope, a dull smudge of a chance that she might take him back—thereby eliminating the need to peddle himself around campus.

But there's no connection between us now, he thought. *She only wanted me to see her, to let me know how she's pulled through on her own and become a better person while I'm still crawling around on all fours begging for what I can get.*

Damn right, little man, Kyna's expression read—so intense it was almost as if she'd somehow broadcast herself into his head for a split second.

He had to swallow and look down at the ground. "Well...I guess I just wanted to see how you're doing. See ya'."

Turning to leave, he allowed himself the small satisfaction of purposely ending their meeting of his own accord. However, he'd only taken a handful of steps when suddenly he felt unnaturally, uncomfortably hot again.

Impossibly, Kyna's voice sounded inside his head:

That's right, Josh. Take a little walk. Right off campus. Screw school, right?

Nothing to do here but be miserable, watching all the pretty girls you'll never have because you screwed up, tapped the wrong dud. Yeah, I heard the story—word gets around, didn't you know? But it's okay, because now all you have are the junkies you service in the toilet, people who'll never love you for more than that brief couple of minutes when they're sharing with you. Every time you finish one off, that's one less person who respects you, one less person who'll pay attention to you when you slink around school each day.

Her words gripped him, and he felt his body being animated by some unseen outside force as, with five minutes before the warning bell, he left school, strode mechanically along the streets toward home—and wondered how, *how* could this be happening?

We've both been busy, Josh, Kyna continued. *You've decided to stick a bandage on your life, but I've been working on the source of the problem. That day when you knifed me and left me for dead, my mom happened to come home early, and she found me lying half-unconscious in the hallway. I spent a couple of days in the hospital—the* hospital*, Josh. My mom was terrified, but she went through it anyway because I would have bled to death or gotten some kind of horrible infection otherwise. You know how we paid for it all? Dead Man. He smiled the fakest smile you ever saw and said he'd "take good care" of my mother and me. He came to me one night, while I was recovering, and he told me to get better soon so we could share just like we did when I was his sweet little girl. Well, I decided right then and there that the day would never come again when I let him so much as lay a finger on me.*

I discovered something, Josh. Something wonderful hidden away beneath all the pain and misery. You think it's just about getting your fix, but it's not. This disease or whatever it is we both have, it's all about how our bodies channel their own energy. You think you're sick because you catch something from someone, but if you look at it differently—if you use it the right way, you can do amazing things.

Joshua was flabbergasted. He didn't understand completely what was going on, but he knew it was real, and he knew he was afraid.

Remember "mind magic?" I know you used to think it was just a joke because you never figured out how to do it, but I had some time on my hands, so I did a lot of reading. My mom brought me a stack of her spiritual books, stuff I thought was just ridiculous before—but imagine my surprise when I figured out I could make it all come true. I was lying there in my bed one night and listening to the sound of my mom and Dead Man fighting. I got so sick of it that I demanded more strength from myself. I insisted that I heal up instantaneously so that I could get up right then and there, leave that insane place where my mom and I always have to walk around on eggshells whenever he's around. "No more," I told myself, closing my eyes and pretending I was made of clay, molding my body into what I wanted it to be.

It didn't happen instantly. I kept at it all night, every night until every muscle was sore—even my brain was sore. But I kept at it and at it until I saw results. And without you there to distract me, I was able to change myself. My wounds disappeared, Josh. I got stronger. I became someone else, someone who wouldn't be messed with so easily by her abusive father or her blood-sucking ex-boyfriend.

His mother's house in view now, Joshua fought helplessly to stop his feet and legs from betraying him. Whatever Kyna had learned during her absence, she'd obviously cultivated it to the fullest extent. Whether or not he wanted to, he was going home, where he would be quite alone with the thoughts of a girl who somehow was able to manipulate matter with her mind.

We're special, Josh. I don't think just anyone can read a book and make it happen like that. We have something only those like us have; we're free to do whatever we like with ourselves. Dead Man knew it and made the mistake of thinking I'd never have the guts to stand up to him. He thought he'd always be able to beat on me, just like he'd always done with my mom, but he was wrong, and on that night when he came up to my room with a beer and a switchblade, I made it clear that I wasn't his little play toy anymore.

And he didn't touch me.

There were tears in Joshua's eyes as he unlocked the front door, stumbled inside, and threw himself onto the floor. His breath came in ragged gasps. Sweat stung his eyes. Most of it, he realized, was his own terror at being manipulated, but a fair amount of what he was feeling was being funneled into him from Kyna's own consciousness. As she relived her own memories, so did he, and it was a curious experience, to be so afraid of and exhilarated by emotions not his own. For the first time, he was able to gaze down upon Joshua Swaney from an outside source—like he was hearing his own recorded voice for the first time—and he didn't like what he saw.

Yes, Josh. Look at yourself, crawling around on all fours like a dog. Such a fearless bad-ass when you were feeding off me all summer, acting like you actually cared for me...but you were just like Dead Man, and now...now I see through it all. Your pretty-boy looks can't hide the monster inside.

He got to his feet again and started toward the kitchen. Images of knives, cheese shredders, and flickering gas burners filled his mind. At Kyna's whim, he thought of what he might do to himself if left alone long enough...how he might exorcise his own personal demons if allowed the opportunity to really see them all clearly for the first time.

I was a scared little girl, Josh. I needed someone to take me away from it all. You know, I'd never kissed anyone before you, never even held hands with a boy until you came along. I thought you were my one true love. I don't blame you for that part not working out. But you knew better than to take from me like you did and just leave me for dead. You knew better, Josh, and you did it anyway.

Standing in front of the stove now, he lifted the top, took a deep breath and blew out the pilot lights. Then he turned on all four burners at once, moved awkwardly along the counter, reaching into the various drawers until he found a box of matches. All the while Kyna sent him more images of misery as the pungent smell of natural gas filled his nostrils. As his fingers probed the inside of the box for a match, he suddenly realized that it really wasn't Kyna controlling him anymore. She was merely opening up every single self-doubt in his mind until he himself could see what a horrible person he was, how greedy and ignorant he'd been—how

it would be a benefit to everyone if he just ended it here and now.

So that's how it works, he thought, holding up an unlit match in his hand and staring at it dumbly. *It's not her at all. It's me. She's just pointing out all the bad spots.*

Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt a shudder, and he knew Kyna was crying, too. Overcome by pent-up rage and raw emotion, she was also a prisoner of the mental vortex: a span of many, many lonely nights spent lying awake in bed, listening to the sounds of a house being devoured alive by Dead Man's insatiable ego; a living nightmare in which Kyna bore Dead Man's weight as he carved away at her flesh, trying to satisfy a craving that could never be satisfied; a frozen moment when Joshua came into her room and stole the last remaining part of her for himself before scurrying away like a common thief.

These were the reasons he stood here now, trembling in his sneakers and accepting himself as the vampire he'd always been—and always would be. There was no other way for it to end.

No more pain.

He struck the match.

* * *

Back in his room, back in the present, Joshua Swaney shifted in his bed and winced from the unwanted memories of a life accelerated to early completion.

No need to relive anything past that moment, he thought, still seeing the match light dance before his blinking eyes. He hadn't anticipated the true agony back then, and he didn't want to replay it now. The funny thing was, he couldn't help but remember the frantic desire to live, once the flames had begun to devour him alive. More than anything else in the world, he'd wanted to continue; despite all the misery and guilt, he'd wanted to *live*.

And he had. Through some miracle (or cosmic prank), he'd pulled through, been given an encore—and now here he was, still in bed, wasting his second chance and feeling as if he'd just written the epilogue of an autobiography that should have ended pages and pages ago.

What would it be like to have been a normal kid? To have just done kid stuff and not spent every waking moment wanting to be eighteen, wanting to be over and done with it all—wanting to know everything about everything. All these years, I could've been out skateboarding with friends, or riding my bike, or swimming. Instead I'm stuck here, so old...old as Methuselah because I tried to prove to everyone that I was bigger and better.

He'd tried and failed, miserably.

Well, he thought, *no more. Time to end this.*

Forcing himself to sit up, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and slowly eased himself into a standing position. He kept still for a moment, allowing his blood to circulate before he took a tentative step toward the bedroom door.

Chapter 33

In late August, Bryce volunteered to patch up the wooden fence that ran along the rear of his parents' house. Most of it was cosmetic work: A sun-dried thicket of weeds and thorn bushes had infiltrated the chain-link fence and swallowed up the bottoms of the beams, while stray animals and the elements had, over time, knocked several of the posts askew.

With clippers in hand and magic on his mind, he set forth into the yard and went at it with a combination of brawn and brain. To his delight, the nastier weeds shriveled up under his gaze—the result of his lessons with Kyna. When he needed to loosen a few of the two-by-fours, all he had to do was imagine the rusted nails uprooting themselves and *voilà!*—they obeyed.

Shortly after noontime, he took a walk down to the hardware store for supplies. When he returned, Daniel was sitting on the back steps and sipping a Coke.

"Hey, Dad," Bryce said, setting down the lumber and wiping his face with his shirt. "What's up?"

Daniel didn't answer at first, but merely held his soda can at arm's length and studied the list of ingredients. After a moment he said, "I'm wondering how to work this out."

"Work what out?"

"Me and your mother."

"Oh." Bryce bit his lip, glanced at the kitchen window to see if Julia was there (she wasn't). "She loves you, you know."

It looked as if Daniel were about to cry, but he held the tears back. "Then why did she do it?"

She didn't do anything—it was Edward, Bryce thought. He said, "Maybe she didn't want to." Maybe she was forced into it.

Daniel looked up at him. "Well, after sleeping on the couch for a nice long while, after not being able to talk to her since the whole thing happened...I think we need some time apart."

"You mean...like, a divorce?" Bryce felt his throat tighten.

"I don't know. I just thought you should know up front what's going on. We've always been very open with you before, and there's no reason to break the trend now."

Bryce studied the grass at his feet. He almost wished Daniel hadn't told him. The thought of his parents no longer being together was intimidating. Sure, he knew the family was destined to fracture somewhat the day he struck out on his own—but something like a separation or divorce...it was a premature step into that

as of yet untouched "someday" future, which wasn't supposed to happen until, well, *someday*. Yet he understood, somewhat, what it must be like for Daniel. He imagined walking in on Kyna and another guy, then having to actually live with her, to sleep with her in the same bed knowing there had been someone else—

He cleared his throat and, hearing Julia's movements in the kitchen, thought of something. "Dad," he said. "Think you can get me a soda from the fridge?"

Daniel nodded and went inside.

Closing his eyes, Bryce imagined the inside of the kitchen, pictured both his parents standing there together, surprised, at first, to have bumped into each other, but turning now face to face, interested, curious—wondering what it was they'd been upset about. Using his knack, Bryce stripped away the emotional scabs: From his mother's mind he stole the memory of Edward's advances, of his final conquest in the shed; from his father's mind he took the hurt and betrayal. Then, for good measure, he pretended he was directing a film and thought the words as they left his parents' lips:

"*I love you, Julia. You know that?*"

"*Of course, Daniel.*"

"*More than anything. You and Bry mean the world to me. I don't know what's come over me lately. I've been so busy with work, I guess...I never spend enough time at home anymore. I want you to know that's going to change. I want you to know that our family is what's most important.*"

"*Oh, Daniel...*"

"*I don't want to miss anymore of it. I don't ever want to lose you because of some dumb job.*"

"*You know that'll never happen. We're a team, right? Bryce and I, we're rooting for you. Always.*"

"*I want to do better. I want us to be in love again.*"

"*We* are *in love, silly...*"

Pleased (and a little giddy) with the results, Bryce receded from the kitchen and reanimated his body once again so that he could resume his carpentry work. Twenty minutes into it, he heard the refreshing sound of laughter.

"Bry!" called Julia. "Come have lunch! There's watermelon! And iced tea!"

He set down his tools and went inside. Even though it was something of a fake-out, his mental play being continuously enacted in the flesh, it was wonderful seeing his parents sitting together at the kitchen table. Julia was propped on Daniel's lap, and he helped guide her hand as she carved the watermelon. There were happy tears streaking both their faces, and, as Bryce took his seat, it became evident they'd reached some sort of resolution. Coerced by him, yes, but happy now; enough of a family to actually have lunch together—and that was what they did. Mother, father, and son sat together and ate, drank, talked to one another. They told jokes. Bryce could feel the immaterial thread cast from his soul that bound them all together now. It was a subtle hum at the back of his mind, an auxiliary biological process, perhaps, that he exerted day and night. He'd only recently come to notice it more fully, and he knew as long as he kept going, the

Powell family would keep going.

The conversation gradually switched to old high school stories. Bryce pushed his chair slightly back from the table and squinted, wide-screening his vision so that he could survey the scene from a third-person perspective. There was Daniel, sitting in soiled T-shirt and sweats, smirking as he dispatched some sort of inside joke concerning an old friend; there was Julia, with her hair tied back, the summer sweat on her brow augmenting a face that had presently become ten years younger; there was himself, shirtless and barefoot—a hopeless ragamuffin, for sure—and leaning back contentedly in his chair. He had a smile on his face, and he was more than a little grateful for a moment's respite in which his parents and himself acted less like a bunch of roommates and more like a family.

It hadn't been like this in a long while.

Eventually, they ate all the watermelon, drank all the tea, and one cherished moment passed inevitably into another. Bryce stuck around long enough to help with the dishes before heading for the backyard once again. Just through the door, his cell phone rang.

It was Kyna.

"*Hey, Bryce. What're you doing today?"* she asked in monotone.

"Nothing much," he replied.

"*Me neither. Why don't you come over for a while?"*

"Cool."

* * *

Whatever the reason for Kyna's funk, the worst of it was dissipated by late afternoon. Listening to the sound of a distant car alarm, Bryce lay with her in her bed and stared up at the clubhouse roof. She'd arranged herself beside him, and was resting her head on his chest, toying with the fabric of his T-shirt. Silence seemed to be her therapy of choice.

After a while, Bryce said, "I worked my parents today."

Kyna smiled dreamily. "Oh?"

"Just like we practiced. In and out of my body, like *this*." He snapped his fingers. "I gave them the first happy afternoon since...since...well, it's been a long time. I didn't even feel the drain when I was finished."

"Good for you."

"I mean, if I can keep them happy, then why not? They don't have to know that they're supposed to be depressed and all. As long as I keep an eye out for them, they'll never know."

"That's cool." Kyna snuggled closer, closed her eyes.

Bryce let her doze. At a quarter to five, he nudged her gently and asked if he could use the shower.

"So I won't smell like a total bum when I go in to work tonight," he said, smirking.

Kyna smiled—that wan, faraway curling of the lips she'd polished to an exact

science—and nodded.

Mrs. Miller was already at work, so the house was empty. While Kyna rummaged in the fridge for something to eat, Bryce made his way into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He undressed and stepped into the shower, which was impeccably clean, no bathtub ring, no mildew stains. In fact, the bathroom seemed to be the only room in the house that had been given any sort of real attention over the years. Plastic ferns hung in the window alcove, and they augmented an exotic variety of shampoos and body washes.

Bryce picked the manliest scent he could find and lathered his hair, soaped himself, and had just reached that vulnerable shut-eyed moment before rinsing his face when he nearly jumped out of his skin as Kyna's voice sounded inside his head:

Bry! Please, oh, God, Bry! Come quick—he's here! Oh, God, Bry!

It was a faraway sound, as if she were standing at the edge of a distant cliff and counting on the wind to carry her voice.

What's the matter? he replied, but direct communication seemed to be nonexistent. Kyna's emotions, however, bombarded him with the ferocity of a hailstorm; her raw terror cascaded over him in waves, and it spurred him on as he quickly rinsed the soap from his eyes and reached for the knob to turn off the water. Halfway to the point, he reconsidered, and instead stepped from the tub, pulled his pants on, and cracked the bathroom door open.

The hallway was too dark to offer any insight into the situation, so he took a deep breath and flung the door open all the way, and as he strode through the hall, hoping he would know what to do if he came face to face with an ax murderer, he heard a whimper. He entered the kitchen and saw Kyna standing backed up against the counter, a tall, curly-haired, ruggedly-built man—dressed completely in denim—hovering over her.

Dead Man.

As soon as Bryce stepped into the room, Mr. Miller (whose back was to him) glanced menacingly over his shoulder. Until now, he'd only ever imagined the man who'd inspired Kyna's intense hatred. Seeing Mr. Miller in person presented a face to go along with all the imaginings, and while it was not the stereotypical maniacal face of a Hollywood villain, there was power in the eyes, danger in the overall complexion.

He must've just dropped by, thought Bryce. *Great timing. The second I go for a shower this guy comes waltzing in—unless he's been here all along, waiting.* He looked at Kyna, who was evidently rooted to the spot, and before he could ask what was wrong, Mr. Miller turned around to face him full.

"So," Mr. Miller said. "This is your latest boyfriend, eh?" He took a step toward Bryce. "The pretty-boy punk you've been letting tap you day and night?"

Bryce hesitated, caught between "latest boyfriend" and the indecision as to how he should approach the situation.

"That's right," Mr. Miller continued, advancing forward until he was within arm's reach. "Serving number thirty-four!" He leaned in close; his breath reeked of beer and cigarettes. "Aw, look at the shock and surprise in those pretty blue eyes of

yours. You didn't think you were her first, did you? No...you knew. Deep down inside, every boy *knows*, but he tells himself it's not true because he can't stand *sharing* with a girl who's already been broken in. Ever wonder why it was so easy to tap her that 'first time?'"

Bryce couldn't believe his ears. As emotionally detached as his own family was, he couldn't imagine someone openly trashing his own daughter like this. As such, there were no second thoughts: Whether or not he could take him, whether or not Mr. Miller was armed, Bryce knew he had to launch himself at the man and hope for the best.

The only problem was, he couldn't move.

Mr. Miller laughed, grabbed a handful of Bryce's hair and twisted painfully. "You think you've got game, huh? Hell, you look older than you are, but I bet you can't even drink yet—and you think you can come in here and help yourself to my family?" Shoving him back hard, Mr. Miller swore under his breath and faced Kyna again. "That's right, sweetie. Doesn't matter how many boys you surround yourself with. None of them count where it matters." He stroked the side of her face, fingers lingering on her neck, and then moved toward the refrigerator.

Bryce glanced at Kyna, and it became apparent why she hadn't moved a muscle throughout: Dead Man had paralyzed her—he'd paralyzed them both. *He has the same knack we do,* he thought, and closed his eyes, attempting to break free. He could feel something inside himself moving and squirming, but the outer casing of his body was as rigid as if it had been cut in stone, and it effectively kept his soul from slipping out.

The fridge door slammed. Mr. Miller, beer in hand, was now skirting the counter. He opened and closed drawers, searching for a bottle opener. He grumbled as he went: "Bitch never knew how to keep a kitchen clean. I'm only paying every one of her goddamned bills...the least she can do is wash a plate or mop a floor once in a while. It's like visiting the county dump. But I say you have to make your own fun, isn't that right?"

Bryce blinked. Of course, neither Kyna nor himself could answer, and this had the effect of creating an awkward silence, which Mr. Miller seemed to disapprove of. He swore again and gave up on opening the bottle. Instead, he hurled it at Bryce, who was unable to dodge and took a stinging blow to the shoulder. When the bottle hit the floor, he winced as the glass shattered around his bare feet.

Mr. Miller laughed and turned his attention back to Kyna. "Your boyfriend taste good, huh? Does he cry when he gives blood? I don't want a whiner. I'm friggin' *starved* today." He leaned in and kissed her neck, puckering the skin with his lips, tasting, teasing. It wasn't necessarily a sexual thing, but it was obscene nonetheless, and blatantly obvious that Kyna was in utter agony over being totally unable to defend herself.

Leave her alone! Bryce shouted, but the words were stuck in his head.

"Oh, hear that?" Mr. Miller said between kisses. "Your man doesn't approve."

With one free hand, he made an odd gesture—and suddenly Bryce convulsed, bursting with pain. Even worse, without the ability to move or cry out, the

pressure inside him merely circulated, squeezing his heart, compressing his lungs. After half a minute of such torture, his knees buckled and he fell to the floor, his vision sparkling.

Now more helpless than ever, he could only listen:

"It was always a contest with you, Kyna. Your mother knew her place, but you were always the third leg...no appreciation for what I provided. I took care of both of you, I gave you a home, I gave you money—all I asked in return was your love and your trust, and you wouldn't give it. Well, a man can't live on table scraps alone. I know what you've got hidden away inside you. I've planted a garden, watched it flourish all these years, and now it's time for the harvest."

Bryce became acutely aware, through his mind's eye, of rough fingers probing between Kyna's legs, and he knew he could take no more. The unbearable pain, as well as his own panicked mental thrashing, made him feel as if he'd explode if he didn't do something to rectify the situation—so that was what he did.

He exploded.

Drawing from some undiscovered energy source, Bryce reclaimed control of his arms and legs as fire shot along his spine and lightning crackled at his fingertips. He tore through Mr. Miller's influence as if it were nothing and jumped to his feet, grabbed the man by the shoulders, and hurled him across the room. He crashed into the kitchen table, knocking it aside and sending the chairs tumbling in three different directions at once. Before he had a chance to right himself, Bryce was pouncing again, knocking him onto his front and slamming his elbow into the man's neck. There was a loud popping noise and Mr. Miller gurgled something unintelligible just before his body went limp.

It could have ended there, but Bryce was still surging out of control, anger, humiliation—pure, unfiltered rage—exploding from every muscle. He grabbed Mr. Miller by the neck, rolled him onto his back, then brought his clenched fist down, imagining, with all his might, the man's skull cracking, exploding, bits of hair and skin, bone and brain splattering outward in a grotesque spray.

And that's exactly what happened. Willpower sabotaged muscle, and muscle overpowered reason. Physically, Bryce's blow wasn't forceful enough to decapitate, but mentally he'd channeled enough energy to drill a hole in the floor. Mr. Miller's torso spasmed once, then became still as blood began to pool on the kitchen floor.

Behind him, Kyna screamed something.

Bryce didn't hear it.

Chapter 34

Kyna stood motionless, arms hanging limply at her sides, lips parted, and tried to make sense of the scene before her: the kitchen a mess, Bryce covered in blood and sweat and shivering as if it were twenty below zero...Dead Man's lifeless torso. Watching Bryce kneeling there, panting uncontrollably as he lifted his hands from the mess, she wanted to scream, to vomit—to explode out of this grim reality and into another, but of course that wasn't possible.

I didn't mean to...I didn't mean to... she thought, over and over. On the one hand, she'd hated her father, had always hated him. She'd lain awake many a night wishing he would just drop dead, but now that it had actually happened—at her whim, no less—she was stunned beyond reprieve.

Bry's body, my mind, she thought. *Doesn't matter if it was his hands doing the killing. I wanted it, I made it happen. I made him kill for me.*

Bryce turned to face her, bewildered horror distorting his usually tranquil facial features, and she knew she had to do something quickly, before the reality of the situation rendered them both useless.

"We have to clean this up," she said quietly, forcing her body into motion. Her legs trembled. *Keep moving, don't think about it, just do something.* She threw her knack, numbing Bryce's nerves and, hopefully, keeping any real panic at bay until the matter was taken care of.

It wasn't easy. He looked at her incredulously, teetering on the edge of insanity. "Kyna, what did I just do...?"

She pressed harder, forcing his senses to yield to her mental veil. "We need to take care of this. Mom gets home in less than an hour—we need to clean this place up, for God's sake."

"But...he's...we have to call somebody."

Kyna felt a knot tighten within her gut. *Who? Who do we call? Our mommies and daddies? The police?* "Don't you understand? We can't tell anyone. If this comes out, everything comes out. You end up in prison, my mom is sent off to a mental hospital, and I spend the next twenty years in therapy. No, Bry. We need to take care of this ourselves—you know that."

Bryce shook his head, evidently trying to clear his mind so that he could think his own thoughts, but she kept her influence steady. She kneaded his will as she set him into motion, walking carefully behind him and lifting him off Dead Man's corpse. Once he was standing, it was easier: She led him into the backyard, fetched a shovel, set him to digging a hole.

"But...won't it, um...won't he...?" he babbled uncertainly as he worked.

Won't he stink? "No, I'll take care of it. We just need a place to put him."

When the hole was deep enough, they dragged Dead Man's body out of the kitchen and deposited it in the makeshift grave. Bryce mechanically filled in the hole, patted it down, and waited for further input from Kyna. At this point, she was exhausted; she'd been simultaneously directing her willpower in several different directions: keeping Bryce and herself sedated enough to dig; keeping the yard (and the rest of the house) under a mental cloak so that her mother, the neighbors—the *police*—wouldn't interrupt them. Now she stood over the grave and concentrated on accelerating the decay process, picturing dirt, roots, and insects weaving their way into Dead Man's flesh, pulling him apart thread by thread and ultimately leaving him as a mere smudge of dust. It took only minutes, though it felt like hours.

Bryce stood beside her, leaning on the shovel and looking like he was trying to ponder something infinitely complicated. With her influence over him, she knew it was like a curious dream to him, a random series of images that held no meaning, but he would wake up soon, and when he did...she knew she didn't have the strength to be there with him.

"Go home," she told him, her voice a pale whisper. "I'll clean up the rest by myself."

He shrugged, put the shovel down and leaned in for a goodbye kiss. She pecked him on the cheek and watched him as he disappeared around the corner of the house.

She waited a while, tracking his progress as he walked home; when she knew he was approaching his parents' house, she let go of everything—

—and collapsed onto the ground.

* * *

Blocks away, Bryce felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. It was enough to knock the wind out of him, and he spasmed inadvertently, missing his step and falling face-first onto the concrete driveway. As he tried to right himself again, he was bombarded by memories and experiences that had accumulated within his subconscious during the past months. Having been unnaturally suppressed for so long, they now came exploding to the forefront of his mind—as if his entire time spent in Anaheim had been a dream he was only now able to remember, only he wasn't just remembering, he was making room for a distinctly different person in his head.

All this time, to be walking around as Bryce but not Bryce, to realize that he'd been living under remote control...

The finale of the ordeal was a terrifying image of Kyna's father lying decapitated beneath him, the blood and gray matter soaking his hands, his jeans. Indeed, as he rolled onto his back on the pavement, looked down at himself and saw the stains, he knew something terrible had happened, and he knew that he'd been an integral part of it.

It was a terrible feeling. His gut clenched, and he coughed vilely, started to vomit. He tried to cover his mouth, but the spray was considerable, and with each heave he felt as if his intestines were trying to wriggle out through his throat. Someone across the street called out, asking if he was okay; he ignored whoever it was, stumbled to his feet and made his way into his parents' house.

Trailing tears and vomit along the way, he half-walked, half-crawled upstairs to his room, where he closed the door and threw himself onto the floor. For a while he was unable to do anything but weep wretchedly. Eventually, though, he became too exhausted for even that, so he let himself settle into a semi-trance. The mental footage of a Bryce Powell unknown to himself continued to play behind his eyelids as the sun gradually set and his room became a subdued purgatory. It was so quiet throughout that, at first, he thought his parents had gone out somewhere, but then he heard soft weeping coming from their bedroom and he knew that Julia was home. He also knew that since he'd collapsed outside, he'd inadvertently relinquished his willful hold over his parents. Without that binding thread, they, too, were remembering things better left to lost dreams and locked-up nightmares.

At the moment, it didn't matter much. Bryce had killed a man, buried his body in Kyna's backyard, and he'd done it without even thinking. Sure, Mr. Miller had been a despicable person intent on doing terrible things to his own daughter, but to have *killed* him...there should have been any number of alternatives to taking a person's life.

More time passed, and Bryce found himself slipping toward the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. Rather than having to suppress a cyclone of raw emotion, he was now completely devoid of feeling.

Burned out. Dead. Like Kee's dad.

He went through the motions of undressing, stuffing his stained garments in a corner of his closet (he'd deal with them later), wrapping a towel around his waist, and stepping into the silent, darkened hallway. The sound of Julia's sobbing had faded. Maybe, he thought, she'd gone to sleep early. He didn't know where Daniel might have gotten to.

Taking careful steps (not because it was dark, but because he was afraid if he jolted himself too suddenly he might awaken all the terrible nightmares that had assaulted him previously), he let himself into the bathroom, where he scrubbed every part of himself numerous times. When he was finished, he returned to his room, locked the door—and froze as he noticed the window had been opened. Dirty footprints led across the room and to the foot of his bed—

—where Ashley Zurich sat waiting.

Bryce backed up against the wall, fumbled for the light switch. He couldn't find it, so his view of Ash left some of her anatomy to the imagination, but he could certainly tell that she was gaunt, sickly, and not at all like the girl who'd bitten him on the bleachers once upon a time at Savanna High. More troubling was the fact that she seemed to be sopping wet, and her breath was coming in steamy puffs—as if she were reclining inside a walk-in freezer.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked after a moment.

He swallowed, his senses reeling. "How did you get in here—?"

"*I* found you, you know that? Kee might have picked you up eventually, but *I* was first."

Bryce looked away, feeling something within himself collapse. He reached for his jeans, quickly pulling them. "You need to leave."

Ashley shook her head, suddenly pouting. "No."

"No?"

"No. I won't. I won't leave until you help me."

"Help you? How?"

Ashley bit her lip, looked off into the shadows. "I'm sick. We all are—except for you." She looked at him again; her eyelids twitched, dark and blue. "You're a carrier. I knew when I first bit you, when I first tasted you."

He set his towel aside. "What are you talking about?"

"It's like a virus. Once you get it, it's in you forever. It gives you power, but it also drains you. Most people have to replenish their *qi* from someone else to keep from starving, but you don't have to worry about that. You have a natural immunity or something—you got the germs, but you don't have any of the symptoms we do."

Bryce's stomach turned. "You're nuts."

Ash was off the bed now and stepping toward him. "Come on, Bryce. Tell me you knew how to do the magic before I bit you, before Kyna taught you how to handle it...before you got the fever."

The fever, he thought, recalling his bout with what he still considered an unfortunate flu bug. Now, for some reason, he could actually think about it without becoming distracted, and he realized that, of course, it had been something much more serious. He'd almost died, but he'd been too delirious to care. Afterward, Kyna had come to him, and she'd given him the mother of all wet dreams—of course he hadn't seen it clearly before.

Kyna had been manipulating him.

Ashley slid into his arms. Her body was cold, wet, and lifeless; her breath smelled like damp soil. "Kee's just doing what she knows. She's so afraid of losing you that she keeps you locked up tight. But I'd never make you forget just because I wanted you to stay with me." She clasped his waist. "I'd be yours, for as long as you like—"

Bryce found himself completely turned off. "That's enough, Ash," he said.

She ignored him, cuddled closer, leaving chilled moisture against his skin. "Everyone wants you for their own. They all want to have their way with you, but not me. I'll be yours, Bryce. Yours."

He pulled her off, held her by the wrists. "I can't help you," he said, and started to move away.

"Please, Bryce," she said, reaching for him again. This time she was quicker, more insistent, and she surprised him by jumping onto him and wrapping her arms about his shoulders, her legs around his waist. She wasn't heavy, but he was already off-balance and so fell forward onto the floor.

"Ash!" he gasped. "Stop it! Let go!"

She ignored him, started nipping at his neck and shoulders as he pushed off the floor, squirmed into a crouch and tried to extricate himself from her grasp.

"Please, Bryce," she breathed, her tissue-paper voice growing hoarse. "Please help me. Please, just give me a little. That's all I need. Watch, you'll see. Just a little to make me bloom for you..."

He was getting frantic now. With all his might he stumbled to his feet and attempted to pry and shake Ash off, but her limbs were like talons, holding fast as she sank her teeth into his flesh—

"Get off!" he yelled, and spun on his heel, charging toward the dresser and slamming into it hard. Ash took the full force of the blow, and she screamed, her arms and legs seeming to shrivel and soften. Her body suddenly began to cave in on itself, her hair thinning and falling out in large clumps, her hands dissolving into papery claws.

Bryce screamed, stumbling backward and falling onto the floor, the Ashley's corpse still somehow alive, still clinging to him and working her beef-jerky hands against him in a feeble attempt to hold on. He screamed again and again, and grabbed Ashley by the shoulders, shoved her off. Her torso fell onto the floor in a misshapen heap and promptly became dust blowing across the floorboards like the smoldering ashes of a spilled ashtray.

Chapter 35

Kyna shifted beneath her blanket, her knees tucked firmly against her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs. Though the evening was still considerably hot, and though she was fully clothed, her body trembled and her teeth chattered.

It was the first time in a long while she'd ever felt truly drained, caught off guard by her own deficiencies and shattered epiphanies—which was to be expected. She'd thrown everything she'd had at Dead Man, and still he'd overpowered her, had very nearly had his way with her. She hadn't been able to defend herself directly, but by using Bryce, by animating his body with pure animosity, she'd paid Dead Man back for all the years of excess. Now, after the fact, she didn't feel any safer, any better.

Even if it had been someone else's hands doing the dirty work.

She might have blamed it on her contracted aural deficiency. With her reserves depleted, she was physically weakened. Ideally, she should've killed her father, cleaned up the mess, and bounced merrily off to her clubhouse with Bryce, tapping his *qi* to replenish her stores. That way, there might not have been any symptoms afterward, and she would've been able to help him dampen the moral aftereffects.

Instead, she'd locked herself in her tin hut, away from the house and the mess festering in the kitchen, waiting to be found by her mother.

Maybe it's not so bad this way, she thought, listening intently as she heard movement in the house. She pictured her mother, just off work, draping her jacket over the sofa, setting her purse down beside the wilted fern on the coffee table. Moving into the kitchen, next, stopping as she saw the stains, curious, first—then screaming, shrieking as she realized it was blood, so much *blood* blotting the floor tile—

—Kyna clamped down hard, squeezing her eyes shut and wringing her aura to extend itself beyond the protective shell of her body. It was rough business; her inner gears groaned and throbbed, the machine of her soul reluctant to jump into action again so soon, but she knew she couldn't simply sit still and listen to the horrific sounds her mother made as she gradually realized she was at the scene of a murder. She floated her essence over Mrs. Miller's, soothing and calming, filling her mother's head with the rich, comforting ether she'd grown so accustomed to over the past handful of years. It was the only thing that made life bearable.

The noises faded away. Mrs. Miller became a flesh puppet as Kyna directed her to the refrigerator and persuaded her to avail herself of the remainder of a six-pack Dead Man had bought last week. Getting drunk would take care of the problem now, and it would allow Kyna a night's rest without having to keep a peripheral handhold on her mother's frail psyche.

Curling up in her cotton cocoon, she shivered and waited.

She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until the sound of someone rapping gently on the clubhouse door woke her up. Yawning groggily and clearing her throat, she sat up, forced her mind to focus itself.

Bry, she thought, sensing his presence.

She left her bed, unlocking and opening the door. He was there, standing in the sickly pre-dawn light with his shoulders stooped and his hands stuffed in the pockets of his sweatshirt. His hair, which partially obscured his face, was disheveled and caught in the folds of his hood; it looked as if he'd been wandering the streets all night.

"We need to talk," he said quietly.

Kyna nodded. "I know."

She stepped aside so he could enter. As he brushed past, she felt the slightest urge to work his will, to make everything the way it was supposed to be, the way she wanted it to be—but she knew it was too late. Besides, she didn't have the strength.

Closing and locking the door, she turned to face him. He was standing with his back to her, hands still stuffed in his pockets.

"I saw Ash last night," he said. "She crawled in through my bedroom window. She wanted me to share with her—she said she needed my help." He turned around now, his expression ghostly. "She died, Kee. Right in my arms. She shriveled up and dissolved into a pile of dust."

Something caught in Kyna's throat. She hadn't seen or heard from Ash since graduation. The hopeful part of her had been convinced the survival instinct would be enough to carry those who'd fed on her autonomously through their own lives; to hear that someone she'd been so close with had been unable to fend for herself...

Bryce continued: "I screamed and screamed. My mom heard the noise and thought some kind of serial killer had climbed in my window. I told her I was having a bad dream. The whole thing, it was a bad dream." He looked as if he were about to cry. "Kee...things like this just don't happen. Ash told me something... something I've been trying to think about all these months, ever since I moved here, ever since I met you, but I could never concentrate hard enough to connect the dots. It was like someone was always confusing me, throwing their knack so that I wouldn't figure out the truth."

Kyna felt herself dwindle. She choked back bitter tears, tried her darnedest to keep her knees from knocking. "I loved you. I didn't want to hurt you."

Bryce closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Kee...is it true?"

He didn't need to be specific—she knew exactly what he meant, and she knew that she'd passed the point of no return. Everything had to come out, or else she would implode, collapse in on herself until she reached an unbearable singularity.

"Yes," she said, keeping still as a statue. "I've been...keeping a lot of things from you because...because I didn't know how to tell you the truth. I was afraid if I did..." How to get it out, *how to get it out?* "...you might not want me anymore. I-I

have a lot of bad memories, you know? Things I try to forget…" She trailed off again, her throat closing up, the muscles of her jaw tightening, and she knew she had to make a conscious leap if she wanted to get the truth out. "Look."

She forced herself into motion, shrugging the blanket off her shoulders. She began undoing her jacket.

"Kyna…" groaned Bryce, undoubtedly getting the wrong impression.

"No," she rasped, pulling off her shirt. "Just look."

The rest of her clothes followed, until she stood before him completely naked. He had, of course, seen her naked on many occasions, but he'd never actually *seen* her, as she'd never truly let go.

She let go now.

It was like releasing a long-held breath: Her muscles relaxed, her skin shimmered as the contour of her chest and arms, her legs and thighs became crisscrossed with scar tissue—the trophies of her disastrous relationship with Joshua, her continued, unsuccessful initiation into the world of sharing and disease and suppression.

When the reversion was complete, she stood very still and waited for Bryce's reaction. Unlike Joshua, she'd been able to build and maintain her body through regular diet and exercise (as opposed to merely using her mental abilities to give herself the appearance of strength). As such, she retained her lean, wiry physique, though she knew she must have looked more like a stitched-together warrior rather than a toned athlete.

Bryce remained quiet. Something flickered in his eyes—sympathy, perhaps, or pity—or maybe it was disgust at discovering he'd been sleeping with a shape-shifting liar all this time. At any rate, Kyna was able to find a small amount of comfort in the fact that he hadn't yet run away or stomped off in a fit of disgust.

There was still hope.

Precious seconds passed, turning into minutes, and still Bryce said nothing. No words of comfort, no show of support.

Kyna padded across the room, sat at the edge of her bed and looked down at herself, tracing the seams of one leg with her finger. "Dead Man tapped me. He gave me the disease. I needed someone to feed off of after that or I would've died, but I sure as hell wasn't going to keep sharing with Dead Man. So I took Joshua. We were going to share with each other and live happily ever after, but we were just kids. We didn't know what we were doing." *So long ago that had been,* she thought. *So very, very long ago…and I still don't know what I'm doing.* "At first it wasn't so bad. I had someone who liked me, I had a way of sustaining myself without Dead Man. I thought Josh could save me, I thought we'd be happy together. But, well, it's like eating your absolute favorite cereal every single morning for twenty years—only it's blood. It's *qi*. You love it, you want it so bad you can't stop having it. Eventually you get sick of it. You get sick of needing it. I can only imagine what it was like for him."

She paused, looked up at Bryce, who hadn't budged an inch. It was more than a bit intimidating, to be completely bare, inside and out, but it was liberating as well

to know that she could reveal herself so completely to someone who was, at the very least, listening.

"I couldn't handle it anymore, after a while" Kyna said, continuing. "I didn't like what I'd become. I started drinking my own blood to fill myself up. I thought I could ignore my problems that way. I just couldn't ignore the wounds. Eventually it caught up with me, and I realized I had to change.

"I disciplined myself, learned to aim my willpower outside my own head. It helped to build up my body as well—the stronger I looked, the stronger I felt, and the more powerful I became. Eventually I was able to influence others as if their will was my own, but I didn't do it for selfish reasons. I helped people who needed control in their lives. People like Natalie and Anthony...Ash." Kyna sniffed inadvertently, remembering. "She was one of my scouters. We tried to find people who would share. Sometimes it was really hard. We felt like deadbeats, prostitutes —literal vampires stalking the night. It wasn't our fault we were sick. Ash tried to kill herself once. She should've died, but I wouldn't let her. Just because she thought she was useless to the world doesn't mean she really was. I shared with her, and she stayed alive because she *thought* she was alive.

"Natalie, Anthony...they were all my best friends, really. They did the dirty work for me because they trusted me to give them the strength they needed. We depended on each other.

"When Ash found you, I knew she'd found someone special. You don't suffer like the rest of us do. You're immune—but that's not why I got with you." Modesty caused her cheeks to flame. "I thought you were cute, and once we got to know each other, I knew it could be different. We're not just a couple when we're together, Bry." She looked up at him. "With you I don't need to beg anymore. I don't need to borrow from other people."

Bryce began pacing the floor in front of her. "So...you lied. I mean...I read Joshua's letter, but it didn't stick."

"Why are you thinking about that now?"

"This whole time...I opened myself to you, and you never told me anything. I couldn't ask you certain questions without you changing the subject or working my mind so...so I didn't care—I didn't *think* I cared—as long as we kept on being a couple." It was obvious he was becoming increasingly upset, but he kept his voice level. After a slight pause, he faced her and said, "You know, you were my first. I dated other girls who asked if I wanted to sleep with them. I always turned them down when it got too heavy too fast because I wanted to save myself for that *special* girl. I thought it was you, but when I woke up yesterday and all the memories came back...I saw myself just giving in to someone I didn't even know. Like I didn't care, so long as I got some." His voice quavered. "Is that it, Kee? You just needed my *qi*?"

He was hurt—Kyna knew that. She wished she knew what to say. "No, of course not. I need you. Not because of some disease, but because I love you. You know that, right?"

"I don't know anything anymore. I didn't know your dad tapped you. I didn't know you had this...this disease, or whatever it is. I didn't know you and Josh were

together. Every time I came close to asking, you made it so that I couldn't hold the thought in my head."

"It...it doesn't matter. I love you."

"How do I know?"

Just look *at me,* she thought. *Would I reveal myself to just anyone?* Nevertheless, she couldn't convince him if he didn't want to be convinced.

"What if I'd been just anyone," he said, after a moment. "Just an ordinary dud, new in town. No superpowers or anything—would you have gotten with me then?"

Kyna couldn't answer the question. She knew it had been Bryce's essence and, admittedly, his good looks that had drawn her to him in the first place. Had he been less radiant on both fronts, she might have passed him by completely. However, that hadn't been the case. She'd found him, attached herself to him with the intention of having a taste and then moving on—but instead, she'd come to cherish him for more than his abundant energy supply. She'd truly fallen in love with him—enough so that she felt it necessary to humiliate herself as she did now, to sit here bare-bodied and defenseless, revealing everything that she'd been keeping from him and from herself.

Even with Josh it hadn't been like this, she thought. *Doesn't he see that?*

"Would you have gotten with me if I were just anyone?" Bryce repeated.

"You're not 'just anyone,'" she replied, lips quivering. "You're special to me."

He sighed, seemingly unconvinced. "I don't know if I can take this anymore."

"Bry, please. Things are messed up right now. We need time to settle down and think rationally about everything—"

"You used me."

"I didn't use you. I loved you—I still love you. I just...I didn't know if you loved me. I wasn't sure. I was afraid."

"You *made* me love you."

Kyna faltered, gasping something that sounded like, "I know." It was, she realized, the first time in their relationship that he'd ever confronted her, and she was unused to being so unknowing. Without her influence, he could go either way: forgiveness or fury.

She prayed he would somehow understand.

"What about your father?" he asked.

"What about him?" she snapped, wiping newly-discovered tears from her face.

"Someone's going to find out. The police—"

"No police. They wouldn't understand—how could they? I mean, Dead Man raising me as a shut-in, tapping me, treating my mom like a cheap prostitute, how we subsisted for all these years...you think they'll understand that? You think they'll understand when we tell them we killed him and buried him in my backyard—you think they'll understand *that*? You think they won't lock us all away forever?"

Bryce shrugged. There were tears trickling down his cheek. "You don't know. It wasn't you who bashed his head into the floor, Kee. I didn't even know him."

But I did, she heard herself thinking. *I never wanted to kill him either, but I did want him dead. He would've raped me, would've made up for all those years he held back. It was only a matter of time.*

"I had to make a choice," she said softly. "In that situation, under those circumstances, what would you have done? It was the only way. He would have raped me and beaten the crap out of you. We had to defend ourselves." She couldn't think of anything more to say, so she merely sat at the edge of her bed with her hands in her lap and waited.

Bryce remained where he was, standing halfway between her and the door. He was quieter than ever, considering, sneaking glimpses of her gnarled body—proof of a ludicrously hard life.

Harder, even, if you have to go it alone. Please, Bry. Don't bail on me. Not when I need you.

He cleared his throat, went for the door. "I need to think about this. On my own."

Kyna felt her pulse quicken. She jolted from the bed, caught his shoulder as he slid the lock back. "I'll call you later, then."

"No," he replied, keeping his back to her. "I really need to think about this—about us—for a while. I don't know how long."

He slid the door open, and for a split second she thought it was over, that she'd lost him.

Too much. I clung too hard, I wanted too much and now he's suffocated. It's my own fault, oh, God, why did I make this happen?

She started to cry, her chest heaving and her eyes watering—but something caught her before she was able to spiral relentlessly into the depths of despair, and the rippling baseline of her survival instinct flared. When Dead Man had frozen her in the kitchen yesterday, it was what had turned her from frightened animal to fearless hunter. It was happening now, a rush of adrenaline flexing muscle, tightening limbs as she grabbed Bryce around the neck and pulled him, stumbling, back inside the clubhouse.

She was herself for only a moment; once her aura flared and her ego soared, she became the Kyna Miller who, when faced with unbeatable odds, nevertheless won the battle, survived at all costs—

—and swallowed the souls of those who did her harm.

Chapter 36

At first it was just a dull ache pulling at the fringes of Bryce's consciousness, something he might have felt upon waking after too much sleep. He moved to turn onto his side—and that's when he was suddenly hit by vertigo, the feeling that he was too small for himself, that his arms and legs weren't quite in their proper places.

Opening his eyes, he found he was still in Kyna's clubhouse, and he was lying on his back on her bed—which was odd, because the last thing he remembered doing was stepping through the door, intent on going home.

He sat up. The blood rushed to his head and a thousand hangovers converged on him, all at once. He went to massage his temples, certain that he had a concussion, and found that his hair had been cut short. The biggest surprise, though, was his body—which wasn't *his* body but, rather, Kyna's. Looking down at himself he saw the telltale scars riddling his otherwise smooth, pale skin; he felt the difference between his legs. He'd somehow been transplanted.

Can she do that? he wondered incredulously.

He slid out of bed, wanting to get a good look at himself in the mirror. It was odd at first, walking around as a girl, Kyna's weight pulling at him in all the wrong places—and there was the fatigue, the drag that, despite Kyna's sturdy build, made every step feel like wading through thick molasses. It was like waking in the middle of the night during a fever pitch: everything ached, everything hurt.

This is what it felt like to be hungry—truly starving.

Bryce stumbled. Kyna had never told him she could swap bodies. Helping him exit his own during astral trips, yes, but it never occurred to him that a soul could step into another body like a new set of clothes.

He approached the mirror, reached up and felt his face, squeezed his arm. He wanted to know why he was in Kyna's body, and why she'd undoubtedly taken his (a quick survey of the clubhouse didn't reveal his male body having been stashed away anywhere). At least she'd gotten dressed before taking off. As quickly as possible, he put on his shoes, though it was painful to bend over, as every little extra bit of pressure to his head magnified the knife edges poking his skull. He realized he was feeling the hunger, the drag that Kyna had spoken of, the symptoms she constantly had to deal with in exchange for her enhanced abilities. She hadn't been lying, as he'd never felt more wretched than he did now. Indeed, he had to pause once shod, as his head felt like it might very well explode.

He took a moment to compose himself and to reach out tentatively with his mind. Kyna's body was considerably weakened; it affected his aural energy and

made it difficult to extend himself clearly, but after a few attempts he could sense Kyna being broadcast along the thread that connected her to him. Wherever she was, and whatever she was doing, she was definitely distraught and frantic—which worried Bryce, because that meant she was running around in his male body and possibly not thinking too responsibly about it.

To get back at me? he wondered. He could sense jealousy amidst a kaleidoscope of emotions. There was also remorse. *Like maybe she swapped with me before she could really think about it.*

Regardless of the reasons behind Kyna's divergent theft, he knew he had to find her soon, before her female body gave in to exhaustion, before he was left with no place else to go.

* * *

An hour's aimless walking brought Kyna to the corner of Lincoln and Euclid Street. Slightly north, just before the freeway, there was a recess in the wild oleanders. Descending the dirt slope, Kyna found herself alongside the Southern Pacific railway. She crossed a small, desolate construction site and stepped onto the tracks, began walking eastward. The rising sun shone in her face, causing her to sweat, and, had the circumstances not been so grave, she might have laughed at such an idiotic display of senselessness. She had no idea what she was doing, where she was going, or why she'd taken Bryce's body at the onset; she only knew that she'd placed action before thought on this, yet another cataclysmic occasion.

What the hell am I doing? she asked herself, kicking at a discarded soda can. She'd been angry and upset—completely susceptible to her own rampant emotions —when she'd stolen Bryce's body, and now she didn't know if she'd done it simply to spite him, or if she just wanted to get away from her miserable life so bad that she'd donned his flesh and run off.

She actually laughed, considering what it would be like to spend the rest of her life in a bigger, stronger man's body. It was mildly tempting, but physically impossible. Her soul had already been imprinted upon her female body at the moment of her birth, meaning she could only spend so much time outside her own flesh before the connection was lost and she died. Had it been possible to swap out permanently, she might have done so long ago.

The question still remained, then: What to do in the here and now? She knew she'd eventually cool down enough so that returning home and facing Bryce again would be bearable, but at the moment she was too wound up to give in to practicality. She wanted something, she just didn't know what. Perhaps a final, childishly selfish attempt to spend time with Bryce—or a part of him, at least—before she let him go for good.

A stretch of track ran behind an abandoned warehouse, where Kyna found privacy amongst a pile of withered orange crates and petrified tires. She sat with her legs crossed and closed her eyes, tried to rise above the terminal misery that was her life. It wasn't easy. There were so many bridges left unburned, so many paths

leading back to the same obvious truth, and no amount of distance between her and the grave in her mother's backyard could change that.

"Hey, got any money?"

She looked up. A pair of high school boys were standing over her with menacing looks on their faces.

"Get lost," she said, looking away nonchalantly and tensing her gut as she readied her aura for retaliation. Bryce's body responded immediately, layered muscles slithering beneath suddenly hot skin.

The boys exchanged amused glances. One reached into his pocket and withdrew a switchblade; the other scowled at Kyna and said:

"How about we just kick your ass, then?"

"Okay," said Kyna. "If that's how you want to do it—"

They pounced, but Kyna was ready—a little *too* ready. When she jumped to her feet and lashed out mentally, channeling everything at once, she forgot that she wasn't in her own body, that this was Bryce's, and it was wired quite differently. In her own flesh, working her knack was somewhat akin to lifting a certain amount of weight: gaging how heavy something was, calculating the amount of brute strength needed, and lifting. Bryce's abilities were trigger-sensitive. The slightest touch had his molten core exploding in a torrent of pent-up energy.

Her vision flared bright white as a searing heat engulfed her, sent her tumbling to the ground in a cyclone of pain and pressure.

* * *

Unused to maneuvering from within Kyna's female body, Bryce made his way homeward feeling as if his joints had been mismatched. With every swing of his arms, every flex of his legs, he felt as if his center of gravity was about to topple him forward onto the pavement. He reached Belinda Circle and strode quickly toward his parents' house, but stopped when he realized (duh!) he was wearing the body of a teenage girl. He'd been concentrating so diligently on his predicament, on how to rectify the whole insane situation if he just had ten minutes alone in his bedroom, that he'd forgotten his own limitations. This had the effect of doubly multiplying his already frantic state, because, as much as he wanted to rush teary-eyed into the arms of the nearest parent, he knew he was utterly and absolutely alone right now.

And the hunger pangs were getting worse.

"You look lost," called a familiar voice—Nathan Brown's. Conjured out of thin air, apparently, he was leaning against the porch railing of his home and casually surveying the cul-de-sac.

"I'm, um, looking for a friend," Bryce replied, closing his eyes inadvertently and swaying on his feet as fatigue washed over him. "His name's Bryce. I think he, um, lives next door, but I can't seem to get a hold of him."

Nathan chuckled. "I see. Why don't you come in for a bit, then? Maybe I can help you sort this out."

Eyes open once again, heart fluttering, Bryce nodded and stepped across the

lawn, up the steps. Nathan led him inside and directed him to a small couch in the living room. He rested his head against the soft cushioning.

God, I'm so tired, he thought. He wanted to roll onto his side and sleep for the next month, not caring that he was wrapped in someone else's skin—and if it turned out little old Nathan Brown was an ax murder with a fetish for chopping up unsuspecting passersby in the comfort of his living room, there was little Bryce could do to stop it, at this point.

"Bryce."

He opened his eyes, saw Nathan standing before him, a steaming mug in his hands. "Yeah?"

"Drink. It'll clear your head."

Leaning forward, he took the mug in his hands, sipped carefully, letting the scalding liquid wash down his throat. Halfway through, he felt his strength returning, his mind becoming sharp once again.

He realized that Nathan had called him *Bryce*.

The old man winked and took a seat in the wicker armchair across from Bryce. "A concoction of mine, just a few herbs, really—but it does the job, wouldn't you say?"

Bryce nodded, amazed, for sure, at the tea's results, but far more interested in how Nathan had been able to see him, curled up in Kyna's flesh like a stowaway in a suitcase, without the slightest qualm. "You have the knack," he said.

Nathan smiled. "So, that's what they're calling it these days?"

"Well, I don't think there's an actual name, but it's something like that. A little trick people like to throw around. A lot of folks seem to have it. Like a disease or something, I was told."

"Yeah," said Nathan. "Great Britain's got Mad Cow, San Francisco's got tuberculosis, and we have Aesop's."

"Aesop's?"

Nathan nodded. "Sort of like the boy who cried wolf. No one has ever proved a single case, though it's damned certain we're suffering from something—so they lump us all together in a miscellaneous category."

"So...you know something about this, then?"

"I've lived long enough to have met my share of the afflicted. All I know is from first-hand experience, years of doing my own research. You know, an 'if you want it done right, do it yourself' sort of thing."

Bryce studied the residue of bark and leaves at the bottom of his cup. "I don't think I've ever had herb tea before. What's in this?"

"A laundry list of herbs you won't find in any health food store."

"And it's the same as, um, blood?"

"It's a reasonable facsimile thereof. So, what's the story? How is it that you've decided to take a stroll through the neighborhood in such a getup?"

Bryce almost laughed out loud. "My girlfriend and I are having problems." It sounded ridiculous, the concept that Kyna had decided to somehow get back at him by stealing his body. Thinking about it now, though, helped him sober up,

and it reminded him just how precarious his situation was. “She says I’m a carrier. I got sick for a couple of hours, maybe, but then it went away. Other people, I hear they have it much worse. She has it much worse. I guess that’s part of the reason she wanted to get with me. The whole time I’ve been dating her, I never knew until...until some serious stuff happened recently.” His stomach churned, ever so slightly. “I couldn’t take it, so I told her I needed to think things over—I mean, I still love her, it’s just...it’s going to be hard knowing the truth.”

“I hear you,” Nathan said, sighing. “We all like to believe there’s the chance we might be immortal, in some small way, but then something like this comes along and levels the playing field. It’s a lot like a textbook disease: each person deals with it in their own way. Some will simply ignore it until it can’t be ignored, others will throw every last drop of blood at the problem to try and stave it off. Even in today’s modernized society, it’s become survival of the fittest. Some people become hunters; I became a gardener.”

Bryce felt a chill, recalling his experiences with the garden doppelganger. “The garden...that statue that looks just like you...”

“It’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Sorry. I can’t help it. When I first saw—I mean...it’s just so strange-looking and all.”

Nathan nodded. “It’s a familiar—my familiar. I keep it well-watered, trimmed, and it flourishes. As long as it stays alive, I stay alive, and it takes the burden off my shoulders...though I know a few other people who have the energy to keep themselves going long after death has come knocking on their doors.”

Death. The word had a delayed effect on Bryce. “You mean you...you’re...?”

“Dead? Well, not quite.” Nathan took a moment to stare into the air just above the coffee table, pondering things that weren’t there. “I used to live in LA when I was younger. I made a nice enough living as a broker, had a cozy little apartment with a jacuzzi—just give me a new gal every weekend and I was the happiest man on Earth...until I happened to bring the wrong lass home. Thought I was too good to attract a little bad karma, and that’s probably what she thought, too.

“After I got sick, after my doctor looked at me and shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment, I knew I was on my own. I spent a small chunk of money on this house and moved into my new life, thinking it wouldn’t be long before it was all mercifully over. Still, I read every medical encyclopedia, every alternative medicine journal, and every self-help book I could find. Somehow I survived long enough so that herbs made enough sense to do some good, and I realized that investing in my own miniature plant kingdom would be more than mere busywork.

“Quiet, humble—away from all the parties, drinking, and women, some would say I’ve missed out on all the fun of being young, but out here in the suburbs, I can really hear myself in the silence. I wasn’t ready to go, when it was my time. Death caught me by surprise, I’ll admit, and would have robbed me of that slow burn so many of us take for granted. I wanted to wind down, to watch the sun set for the last time rather than have the carpet yanked from under my feet.”

Bryce thought of Ash, and he wondered how long it had been since death had

made her a vampire by necessity. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. I'm not. We all come into this world without a thought in our heads. It takes a lifetime to make sense from the senseless. The one thing we all have in common is the urge to survive, so that maybe one day we'll be around when the answers are handed out. I'm just surviving."

It was a simple notion. Perhaps a little *too* simple. But when you got right down to it, what was life except the urge to survive?

Bryce smiled, set down his mug—

—and that's when the world exploded.

* * *

Hot hellfire raged all around, pinprick daggers speared Kyna through and through as she struggled to get a handhold, a foothold—any sort of control over the mad rush gushing forth from Bryce's mighty reserves.

Her prospective attackers had long since fled, leaving her alone to crawl and gasp on the ground like a wounded animal. She choked and screamed, felt her clothes catching fire, felt the gravel beneath her sizzling and smoking—and she heard herself thinking, *I'm going to die. Really. This is it. This is how I'm going to die...*

To make matters worse, she was going to die in Bryce's body, leaving him on his own to sort things out afterward.

My own damned ego, she thought. *Because I had to somehow have the last word, his life will be ruined just like mine. Not good enough for me that I could just crawl off into my own hole and die. I had to drag him down with me.*

The flames burned hotter, and Kyna felt herself losing consciousness, her thoughts scattered and meaningless and devastating.

No wonder he hates me—he probably never liked me...all just my imagination insisting on keeping control, pretending I was just like anyone else...and all along, I was devouring him, his soul, his body—his beautiful body, dissolving now, destroying itself in an attempt to get rid of the virus, to get rid of me...

And that would have been it, her last, bitter revelation before the darkness of death, had not Bryce, accompanied by someone she'd never met, suddenly appeared beside her in the mental whirlwind.

Kee—it's okay. I'm here.

She felt a steadying influence, a guiding vibration lifting her out of Bryce's body.

No, she thought. *Too much pain! I can't ask you to do this for me—*

Kee, don't worry. Please. We'll deal with this later. I can handle it for now. You just go with Mr. Brown, okay?

Kyna felt her soul shifting past Bryce's as she slipped back into her body, Bryce into his. It was tantamount to sending him naked into a burning house. *Oh, Bry...*

Shush. You know where to find me.

And with that his consciousness receded.

* * *

Kyna, now in her own body again, now sitting huddled in the passenger seat of Nathan Brown's Volkswagen as they sped along Lincoln en route to a dusty stretch of track behind a secluded empty warehouse, was shaking like a leaf. Expectation had her hoping for the best, but fearing the worst—and knowing that this day, once past, will have scarred both Bryce and herself for life.

He was there, lying face-up on the ground where she'd exited his body. His flesh was seared, his clothing smoldering. The burns weren't as serious as Joshua's had been, but there would be scars, memories.

He was mumbling:

"...not so bad, Kee. Really. I can stay just above my body and hardly feel it..."

Kyna wanted to cry, to throw herself on the ground and beg for God to take her life so that she might not destroy another's, but she kept herself moving, not thinking but getting done what needed to be done: lifting Bryce into the car, smoothing his wounded skin with her willpower as Nathan drove them home. It was grueling work—she was already taxed beyond anything she'd ever felt before—but it helped the healing process, and she knew she'd bleed herself dry if it meant she could repair at least a part of the damage she'd done.

When they arrived at Belinda Circle, Bryce was somewhat coherent, and able to walk, with help. Kyna continued to suppress her thoughts and emotions (to the point of causing stomach cramps) as she helped Mr. Brown carry him home. The final stretch was almost unbearable: knocking on the front door of Bryce's parents' house, waiting seemingly forever for it to open—and when it finally did, seeing Mrs. Powell standing there, hand suddenly slammed over her mouth as she cried out at the sight of her incapacitated son.

Kyna watched the scene through tear-glazed eyes and prayed for the strength to carry on.

Chapter 37

A Saturday afternoon, the following summer: It was one of those days when spontaneity was in the air, and Kyna's restless mind was, at the moment, as clear and blue as the California sky.

Today was Picnic Day, a sort of tradition started by both the Powell and Miller families in recent months. Every other weekend—barring rain or the Santa Anas—was spent at the local park and augmented by a cooler full of tuna sandwiches, lemoned cucumbers, Dr. Pepper, and a very special iced tea (Nathan Brown's recipe, which had become Kyna and Bryce's unabashed confection).

With her mother (wearing a lovely summer dress and looking healthier than ever) at her side, and the Powells walking hand in hand not far behind, Kyna ascended a shallow hill and watched amusedly as Bryce bounded ahead to find the perfect spot.

"That's the perfectionist in him," Mrs. Miller joked, and nudged Daniel in the ribs. "He gets that from *you*."

Bryce called over his shoulder: "You'll thank me when you're able to have a lunch free of mutant ant hills and cursed burial mounds." He set down the cooler in a patch of shade offered by a trio of sycamores and waved his arm in the air. "Over here, y'all."

Kyna helped set out the blanket—a colorful patchwork quilt that her mother had finally completed earlier in the year—and, once everyone had settled, distributed the sandwiches. As she ate, she listened to the conversations, laughed at the jokes, and generally allowed herself to slip into the languid flow.

Bryce moved beside her as the afternoon waned and the sunlight became golden, and she snuggled into his arms, smelling the breeze on his skin, in his clothes. She missed his sun-bleached tresses, which he'd sacrificed for a buzz-cut—something different, something to set himself apart from his first few months in Anaheim. She, too, had changed somewhat, allowing her hair to grow out for the first time since her childhood.

We're still the same people, she thought, *and yet somehow different...somehow set adrift from what hurts most. At least for today...*

She gazed up at Bryce, and she knew it was the same for him, knew that sometimes he awoke in the middle of the night in cold sweats, with icy tears chilling his cheek. But it was never so bad that there weren't days like this, days when the mental storm front kept its distance.

And even on a day like today, when the warm routine had lulled her into a waking dream state, away from school, work, and worldwide worries, there was still

room for a pleasant surprise, something totally unexpected in and of itself, but not entirely unwelcome: Joshua.

She spotted him on her way back from the women's restroom. He was running to catch a Frisbee, and he almost collided with her, apologizing, dusting himself off as he recognized her and fell silent for a moment. She had a momentary flashback of the previous summer, when she'd slipped the recipe for Nathan Brown's special tea through his bedroom window—a peace offering, a final goodbye, if he'd chosen to accept it. Now here he was, looking healthy—looking whole for a change. He'd finally filled out, less a wispy youth and more a hardy young man.

The funny thing was, she found herself devoid of all the old adolescent reactions; she didn't feel the slightest pang from him, either.

"Hey," she said, after a moment.

Joshua nodded. "Hey."

"Beautiful day, huh?"

"Yeah. Had to get some Frisbee action in. Are you here alone, or...?"

"I came with my family. How about you?" She glanced past Joshua's shoulder, saw his companion, an agreeable-looking guy dressed in cargo pants and a tank top, waiting patiently.

"That's Ian," Joshua said. "He takes good care of me. We...take care of each other."

Kyna nodded, understanding. She looked off into the trees for a moment, pondering various questions, random ways of catching up on the times. Then it dawned on her that she already knew everything she needed to know: Joshua was alive and healthy. Anything beyond that would be retreading old territory; it wasn't necessary.

"Well," she said, smiling warmly—and meaning it. "It's nice seeing you again. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"You, too," replied Joshua, with a nod.

They parted ways, and Kyna returned to the picnic blanket, where she and the others finished the soda and cucumbers, and, for the rest of the afternoon, it was good to be alive.

About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.